

You Can't Earn This

Series on Philipians

Leopold Mozart loved music. When his son Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born, Leopold had great ambitions for him. Imagine the fathers delight when Wolfgang mastered his first musical composition. It took him only 30 minutes, and the boy was just 3 days short of his 5th birthday. By the time he was six, he was playing before the Empress of Austria., and it wasn't long before the 6 year old was wowing the French and English royal families with his piano playing skills. This hugely gifted pianist and composer had hit the big time long before he was a teenager. Genius is a word that gets a bit over-used these days, but genius is the only word to use for Mozart.

Every now and then, a combination of factors comes together produce an outstanding individual. These people are absolutely at the top of their game. Sometimes it's because they were pushed by their parents. Sometimes it's a natural ability. Sometimes it's the combination of both. Here's another example, this time from the world of Jewish religion. This young man had an impeccable pedigree, which gave him a huge head start. Here's what he says: **"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."**(*Philippians 3:4 – 6*) Because we are not Jewish, we probably don't appreciate what is being said here. Let's take a look at his pedigree;

- **"Circumcised on the eighth day."**

People who converted to Judaism from another religion or no religion were circumcised at the time of their conversion. But a true Jew was circumcised on the eighth day after birth. That act of circumcision as a baby marked a man off as a real Jew. Real Jews were proud of their heritage.

- **"Of the people of Israel."**

Jews who could say that about their family tree meant that their line went right back to Jacob, who was the father of the true Israelites. This man was so proud of that, and he sincerely believed that God would be proud too.

- **"Of the tribe of Benjamin."**

This is a real pedigree statement. For a Jew, the tribe of Benjamin represented the aristocracy of Israel. Of all the tribes of Israel, Benjamin had produced its first King. This man Paul was so proud of the fact that he came from the cream of Jewish society.

- **"A Hebrew of Hebrews."**

At the time when Paul wrote this letter to the Philipians, the Jews were scattered all over the Roman Empire. The numbers of Jews who could still speak the Hebrew language were becoming fewer and fewer. Paul was so proud that he was one of the few who could still speak the original language.

- **"In regard to the law, a Pharisee."**

Pharisees lived as strict a life as it was possible to live. If any one deserved Gods favour, the Pharisees did. They tried so hard to be perfect. They were a super religious group that would put all of us to shame in terms of consistently living out what they believed. They were an elite group of 6000 Jews, who obeyed the Word of God in absolutely everything.

- **"As for zeal, persecuting the church".**

Paul had been so convinced that being a good Jew was the way to be right with God, that he actively crushed any faith that taught otherwise – especially Christianity. He persecuted Christians because he felt they were corrupting Gods law with their teaching. He was fanatical about stamping out anything or anyone that would corrupt what he believed to be the truth. He even went as far as imprisoning and killing these followers of Jesus. In doing that, he genuinely believed he was doing God a favour.

- **"As for legalistic righteousness, faultless".**

He had tried so hard to live a straight life before God that he could honestly say that before God he was blameless as far as the law was concerned. That's quite a statement. Most of us wouldn't even claim to be blameless as far as the ten commandments are concerned, let alone to say that we have kept all commandments of God's law – more than 600 of them. But Paul was at the top of his game in religion.

What Paul is saying here is that he never did a wrong thing. He got as near to God as it was possible to get by trying. He was very religious, morally scrupulous and had given his whole life to getting right with God. He was so proud of all his efforts. If ever there was a man with an impeccable pedigree who really tried hard to be righteous, it was Paul. He had built his whole life on an assumption which he was sure was right. The assumption was that all of his pedigree and all of his efforts to please God were not only going to get him into God's heaven, but actually get him a front row seat. He was sure that when God added up all the ticks and crosses, he would be well over the 50% pass mark, and that would get him into God's heaven.

That is the religious spirit of hundreds of thousands of people today. All around us are people who genuinely believe that they are doing pretty well as far as God is concerned. They spend most of the day helping people. They are making a genuine contribution to the world. They give their money to charity. They only get the occasional speeding ticket. They don't beat their wife. They don't cheat on their marriage. They do honest business deals. They give up time in the weekends to work for local clubs and organisations. When trouble strikes they are the first ones there to help. They live on the assumption that God takes notice of all of this, and that when the score is counted up, they will have a pretty healthy margin that will get them in to God's heaven.

The thing that gets up their nose more than anything else are Christians who tell them that the way they are living is not good enough for God. They get really offended, because like the Apostle Paul, they have built their life on the understanding that God will accept them into his heaven because they have been doing their best to help themselves and help other people.

The revolutionary discovery that Paul came to was that all of the Brownie points he thought he had built up with God, by being super religious, weren't worth a hill of beans. Listen to what he says;

"But 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 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." (Philippians 3:7 – 9)

Paul looked back at all his attempts to be good enough for God and made a startling statement. He says that all his good efforts are like a pile of the stuff they spread on pasture to fertilise it. It's a word that people use as an expletive today. It's like emptying a sewer and saying to God – "Here's my best, isn't it wonderful!" He is saying in effect that being proud of our good efforts is like being proud of a pile of dung. In another part of the Bible it says this ***"And all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6)*** The only thing that is acceptable to God is the righteousness that is in Jesus. It's the goodness of Jesus, and only his goodness, that will open the door to heaven for us. Our goodness isn't good enough. No matter how good we are, we are not good enough for a holy God. Despite his amazing Jewish pedigree, Paul came to the conclusion that the only thing that would make him right with God would be to put his faith in the goodness of Jesus Christ. Everything he had staked his life on was just a pile of dung, and that the only thing that was going to count in the end, was faith in Jesus Christ.

There is a truth that is absolutely central to the Christian faith. It's wrapped up in one word – grace. Grace means that God is good to me when I don't deserve it. Grace means that instead of relying on my own goodness, I have to accept that my goodness looks like a pile of dung to God. The starting point is accepting that I am a sinner, and that I need Jesus Christ to save me. Grace means that Jesus' death on the cross is the means by which I am saved, not through any of my own effort. People who think that they have lived a good life have a hard time believing that, because they want to trust in their own goodness. They don't think they need saving.

The movie "Saving Private Ryan" is set in the Second World War, where a platoon of American soldiers is sent on a dangerous mission inside enemy territory to rescue Private James Ryan. The captain who leads the platoon, played by Tom Hanks, leads his platoon through occupied territory trying to locate this one soldier so he can be rescued and sent back to America. At great cost, with some of the soldiers being killed, they finally locate Private Ryan. The twist in the tail of the story is that Private Ryan doesn't want to be rescued. He doesn't want to go home. He wants to stay with his buddies. He's got this amazing offer of grace, and he rejects it.

The movie ends with most of the platoon being killed in a fierce battle. I want to play you some closing scenes from the movie.

VIDEO CLIP FROM 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN'

Start – Soldier dresses the wound of the Captain and calls out for a Medic as Private Ryan comes over and kneels down.

Finish – End of movie when camera pans to American flag.

Did you pick up the last words of the dying captain? In his dying breath he says to Private Ryan "Earn this!" Then he dies. Private Ryan is saved. For the rest of his life he's got these words ringing in his ears. "Earn this". Those closing scenes in the movie are showing all the agony of Private Ryan. All his life he's been plagued by doubts as to whether he has earned his salvation. He's never been sure that he was good enough. That's why he has to ask his wife "Tell me I've been a good man".

The message of the movie is the exact opposite of God's grace. God's grace says "You don't have to earn this!" You never will be good enough, but Jesus Christ came and died to rescue you from your sins. His sacrifice was good enough for God. You can go free. To reject a gift like that and replace it with an attempt to earn your salvation is nothing short of madness. God is a God of grace, and He's offering it to you. Take it. Thank Him. And enjoy it.

Invitation to respond to Christ.

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