

Series: What's So Great About the Gospel?  
Philippians 3:4-8

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## **“God's Greatest Challenge”**

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Amen! You may all be seated. Before I begin, however, I want to draw your attention to your bulletin...the front page of your bulletin...if you would look with me. Right down at the bottom of the bulletin someone pointed out to me earlier. They said, "Lindsay, it is not sin; it is not death; it is not injustice that is God's greatest challenge because our bulletin actually reads, 'God's Greatest Challenge – Lindsay James.'" So, I just wanted to clarify before we begin that *I* am not God's greatest challenge; although, I do vaguely remember my mom saying something about that when I was growing up.

Oh, well, welcome to worship this morning. Really glad you're here. It's a privilege as always to be giving the Word for you today. So before we get into that, let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful for You this morning, for the beautiful sun that is shining, for the chance to laugh, for the chance to say "hello" to our neighbors, to meet new people. Lord, ultimately, to worship You. So, Lord Jesus, as we open up Your Word, we pray that You open our hearts and our ears, and help us to continue to deepen our understanding, our knowledge, and our experience of you. It's in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

There were 60 seconds left in the game. There was the last game of our season, and we were dead tied. Sixty seconds to go. Now, I want you to picture this with me. The opposing team has the ball, and they are with full force charging the goal. I feel this sudden fear wash over me as I realize that the only thing that stood in the way of the ball and the goal was my small fourth grade body.

So picture this. Here the team comes with full force, but suddenly an interception. But then an ensuing struggle for the ball, and then...to my horror...a cry of pain. I watched as one of my teammates crashes to the ground. I'm panicked. I don't know what to do. All of a sudden, I'm up, and I'm running to her side. I'm waiting to hear the sound of the whistle, which is going to pause the game. But to my horror, that whistle never blows, and the game continues.

As I reach the side of my teammate, I look back to watch as the opposing team takes a shot straight into the heart of the goal. Right there before my eyes! What was I thinking? I had left the goal vulnerable and unguarded. When the team had their shot, they took it, and the game was lost. Oops! I learned two very important things that day. Actually from my coach, who was furious with me, I learned two very important things.

The first is, apparently in the game of soccer, the role of the goalie is to never leave the goal. The second thing I learned is the value for my coach was to win at all costs. Now I'm sure that all of us know this mentality intimately. Everything has a cost. We live in a world where winning, succeeding, gaining, advancing, achieving has a value that's placed above almost everything else.

I will be honest with you. I love to win. In fact, I didn't realize how much I love to win until I got married. Then, I'm playing a game of *Sorry* with my husband, which is, by the way, just a terrible game, because they have this card. When you get the *Sorry* card and you throw it, that basically means your teammate is going to wipe you off the board. Then of course, they have to say the words, "Oh...I'm so sorry!" as they like wipe you of the board.

So, I'm playing this game with my husband, and he beats me. First game..."Oh, I'm sorry." Second game..."Oh, I'm sorry." Third game..."Oh, I'm sorry." At that point, I realized how much I love to win because I burst into tears, and I accused him of cheating. I'm working on that. I'm still a work in progress today. So I'll be honest, we all love to win, achieve, gain.

Yet last week, John pointed out a very different mentality...*humility*. Jesus, who had the status of God, humbles Himself and becomes a slave. Jesus, who had everything, makes Himself nothing. Then He says these upside down things like, "The first shall be last. The greatest one is actually the servant of all. The widow's mite is worth more than all the treasures of wealth."

Then we learn these things from Scripture, that for Paul, a thorn in the flesh becomes a vehicle of power and strength for him. We learn that for Jacob, a limp becomes a mark of God's presence and God's grace. We learn for a weeping mother that suffering is grace disguised.

When Jesus came and humbled Himself and made Himself a slave, He reversed the value. He took what the world claimed as valuable and made it nothing. What the world claimed as nothing, Jesus made of real value. In a moment, we're actually going to take a look at how this value reversal plays out in the life of Paul and in the city of Philippi. But before, let's take a little review.

The city of Philippi...our book of Philippians that we're in this morning...straddled the east-west turnpike of Macedonia. So basically what that meant is that it was located and situated in such a place that it had a various degree of cultural and religious influences. Lots of various degrees of that. One of these influences came from a group called the Judaizers.

Now the Judaizers were strict observers of Jewish religious law and tradition. They went around the city as they entered into Philippi proclaiming their religious authority as strict adherers to the law, and they began a teaching. They began to say that all Gentile Christians must be circumcised in order to have true value in the eyes of God.

Because of their religious credentials and because of their persuasive teaching, some of the people in the city of Philippi began to believe them. All of a sudden there was division among the community. When Paul catches word of this division, this is what he says to the people of Philippi. Philippians 3, verse 4 through 8, "...***If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.***"

Now I'm going to pause here, and I'm going to walk you through this passage verse by verse. What he is saying is, he says, "If others." Paul here is actually speaking about the Judaizers. So what he is saying is, "If the Judaizers think they have reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more."

Now when Paul is referring to confidence in the flesh, what he is referring to is what they're relying on as their spiritual résumés...their accomplishment in having achieved circumcision. So what Paul is saying, "Well, if the Judaizers think they have reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more because..." Now this is what Paul says continuing on, "Because not only was I circumcised on the eighth day, but I am ***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 righteousness based on the law, faultless."*

Paul has a perfect résumé, a powerful status, and unthinkable accomplishments. In regard to the law...he was faultless. In this passage, Paul takes his credentials, which happen to be much more significant than the credentials waved by the Judaizers, he takes his credentials, and then he does something very surprising with them. After building his résumé, he says this, "*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*" I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Imagine...after working an entire lifetime to build this kind of a résumé, what does Paul do? He goes and he throws it all away. Then he goes even further to say, "In fact, every single thing in my life I now consider a loss because of one thing...the infinitely deeper value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord."

Now I want to make clear that Paul is not condemning the devotion of the Judaizers. He is not condemning following the law. That in itself is not a bad thing. But what Paul is saying is, "There is so much more for you. In fact, there is so much more, that by comparison, everything else is deemed worthless."

Many of you may know author and writer Tony Campolo. Well, when he was very young, he and a buddy got together, and they decided they were going to make a huge prank on their local community. So as they were trying to decide what it was they were going to do, they decided, "To prank this community, we're going to break into a local store."

So what they did was, they broke into a local store, got in the store, but then I think their moral compass started going off because they said to themselves, "We're actually Christian boys, so we don't want to do anything super illegal like stealing from the store." Apparently breaking and entering wasn't "super illegal" in their minds. So they say, "We're not going to do anything super illegal like stealing. Instead, what if we take all of the price tags and switch them around and try to confuse everybody."

So what they did was they took every single expensive item in the store with high value, and they switched a price tag and made it worth a quarter...a dime. Then they took all of the inexpensive items with very low value, and they made them quite pricey. So you can imagine the following day when people walked into the store, shocked to find that their can of beans actually costs a lot more than their filet mignon. Here they are absolutely shocked that the items they had expected to have value were totally different.

Now we all put price tags on things in life. We put price tags on possessions, reputation, education. We put price tags on our spiritual résumé, our other résumés, our time. Everything has a cost to us. Everything has a value. But we see in the case of Tony Campolo that price tags can actually be quite misleading...that price tags could actually turn on us.

For example, the world tells us that possessions have high value. Yet we've all hit that moment when we've realized the unsatisfying pursuit of consumption has a misleading cost. It leaves us insecure...always wanting more...always questioning, "Do I have enough? Am I enough?" it has a misleading cost.

The world tells us things like, "Reputation has high value." Yet, the constant upkeep of image management...the constant upkeep of trying to look perfect, a certain way...it has a misleading cost. It actually leaves us quite empty, alone, feeling unknown for who we truly are.

The world tells us that advancement has high value, but we all know that no matter how old we are, no matter how many experiences and achievements we've had, that someone else has always had more. That someone else is always just a little bit ahead. Just a little bit better. It has a misleading cost. It leaves us empty. It leaves us self-focused. It leaves us unaware of the needs of others.

Time...we all know that time has a significant cost because it all at some point will run out.

When time ran out for a man named John Knox in the sixteenth century, he was buried. However many years later, a church was built and a parking lot was paved right over the top of his grave. Now for those of you who don't know the name John Knox, John Knox is one of the founders of our Presbyterian heritage. He is one of our heroes in faith. This is a man who radically advanced the gospel in his time, just an incredible man. Yet despite all of those accomplishments, when you go to Scotland to find his resting place, you find it in stall #23 of a parking lot...stall #23 of a parking lot.

Now Paul would say that John Knox's accomplishments were not in themselves a bad thing. In fact, he would probably say that John Knox is an incredible man and an incredible contributor to the kingdom of God. But what Paul was saying is at the end of the day, if honors, titles, and accomplishment are all you have, what do you really have? What Paul is saying is that all of these things are worthless. There is something of more value for you...something that will last...your relationship with Jesus Christ.

We are in a sermon series today called *What's So Great About the Gospel?* Today, our question is, "Well, what's so great about knowing Jesus?" as I began to wrestle with this question, I began to wonder how someone who was a seasoned follower of Jesus would answer this question. So this past week, I had the awesome privilege of sitting with a long-time member of this congregation named John Jenks.

Now John Jenks has known Jesus...he has known the surpassing worth of Jesus...for over 60 years. When I asked him, I said, "Okay, John, what's so great about knowing Jesus," he began telling me all of these stories about his life...all of these meaningful Scriptures in his life. As he was speaking to me, there were quite a few things that were jumping out, but one thing stood out in particular.

It was when he began to speak about the faithfulness of God. He began to speak about a God who had been with him all of his life...in the ups, in the downs, in the hard moments, in the easy moments, in his marriage, in his raising kids, in his work, and the faithfulness of God in his golf game. Actually, he didn't say that, but I know for a fact from someone else that God has been very faithful in his golf game. But he began talking about the faithfulness of God.

He also talked about a God whose faithfulness surpassed his own. A God who was there when he realized he could not live his life out of his own volition...that he needed something more...something of more value. Then he spoke about a God who was faithful to meet him there with a message of grace and hope and love.

Now as I sat with John's story, it helped me reflect a little bit on my own. Before knowing Jesus, I was on a life trajectory that would have yielded nothing but emptiness. I was on a frantic search for meaning, purpose, value. I was searching in all the wrong places. I will spare you all those details, but I did want to

share with you one story. It was from a time when I was in college. I like to share this with all my college students because it tends to be a little bit more applicable in their context than it may be in yours. But it gives you a bit of an idea of God's faithfulness in my own life.

It happened on a night in college, on a weekend...like any other weekend at college. I found myself in the local bar, having had too much to drink. Yet this night was different than any other night because in this night, although I had had too much to drink, I had a moment of very real clarity. I sat there on that stool, and I looked around at all of my friends who were laughing and talking and dancing and having a great time. I realized in that moment that I had never felt so alone. I had never felt so utterly empty.

I went home early that night hoping to sleep off this emptiness, this loneliness. But when I woke up the next morning to find that the hole which was eating my inner being was still present, I remember crying out in that morning thinking, *There has got to be something more. There has got to be something different. There has got to be something of more value for me.*

Several days later, that something of more value knocked on my door. It was an acquaintance of mine named Stephanie. She had noticed that I had been struggling. She said to me, "You know, Lindsay, I just wanted to come by today and tell you that I'm on my way to this great little church called Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. It's just a half an hour drive up the freeway, and I wanted to extend an invitation for you to come along with me."

I came to know Jesus shortly thereafter at a great church called Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. As I look back on my life, I realize that God has been there all along. All along...even in my nominal Christian home...even in my crooked and confused path in search for meaning and value...God had been there every single step of the way.

Now John Jenks...his story of becoming a Christian...of knowing Jesus...is actually quite different than my own. In fact, he grew up in this solid Christian home and had a path that was very straight and narrow. But there was one similarity between his story and mine. That was the faithfulness of God, that in our coming to know Jesus, we came to know a God who is so much more faithful than us.

What's so great about knowing Jesus? There are only a few things I can say. Knowing Jesus switches the price tags in our lives. Knowing Jesus restores the true values of our lives, but it also restores the value that we've always had. Most importantly, knowing Jesus bring us into a very real and transformative relationship with a faithful God.

So if you're sitting here this morning, and you are thinking, *Gosh, I know a whole heck of a lot about God, but I don't actually know God personally in a relational way.* Or if you're sitting there this morning feeling like you are sitting in a lot of emptiness and loneliness. Or if you are sitting here this morning feeling like, *Gosh, my price tags have been switched all around and totally confused.*

If this is you this morning, I want you to know there is hope and an invitation. All you have to do is reach out and say, "Yes, Jesus. Yes, I know my price tags are switched. I know my life is inadequate. I know I need You." In your saying "Yes" I pray you come to know the radical faithfulness of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus, we come to You in a whole variety of places. Some of us feeling the pain of emptiness and loneliness. Some of us feeling confused by the various values the world claims in attempting to figure out how to live in this world and yet know You and what that means.

Lord, some of us come to You today for the first time not knowing You and asking You, Lord, "Yes, come into my life. Help me to know You in deeper ways."

For all of us wherever we are, Lord, we pray...we ask...Lord, help us to know Your grace, Your mercy, Your love, and Your ways. It's in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.