

Introduction:

Statistics are an important part of our culture. And they play special roles in many of our lives. With the primary election coming up for the presidential race next year, pollsters are frantically putting out statistics for which candidate is more popular, which one did better on which debate, etc. Rotten Tomatoes.com gives us statistics on movies by calculating all of the positive and negative reviews that a movie receives from various critics and publications and giving it a percentage which tells the potential viewer whether the movie is worth your time or not. For instance, the new Thor movie got a 77%, so it is worth seeing, while the new Transformers got a 36%, so it is not worth it. Football player and team stats are important when you put together your fantasy team. And knowing card statistics is important when you go over to the Poker game at June and Joyce's.

In the passage read today, Paul begins by giving his stats as a good Jew. If he had a batting average, it would be .400. If he were a movie it would be 100%. Why does Paul do this? It seems fairly arrogant for him to tell his readers all of these things, even though they are true. Well, he has a point. Shortly after Paul finishes listing off all of his achievements, making him the Michael Jordan of Judaism, he says this in verse 7, *"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."* Okay, so now the plot thickens; why did Paul tell us how righteous he was only to follow that with how meaningless it all is? Wouldn't it have been better to say nothing all?

Transition:

To understand why Paul was so willing to discard and turn away from his professional religious past, we're going to break down this passage a little more by looking at it in three sections, starting with verses 4-6

1) verses 4-6:

In this section, Paul basically says, “Hey I’m Paul; I’m kind of a big deal.” He lays out to his readers exactly how righteous of a Jew he is and why. It seems odd though that at this point in the letter Paul would want to establish his credentials. Well, in the passage preceding this one, Paul gives the church a harsh warning against traveling Jews trying to undermine his teaching. In order to speak a message that challenges traditional Jewish practices, Paul had to establish himself as one who could speak with authority. And so he gives his stats, starting first with the privileges given to him in his birth as a Jew and second with the achievements he had done in his lifetime to prove himself as a righteous Jew, a man of worth.

A) Birth Privileges

So first, what were Paul’s birth rights or privileges? **One**, he was circumcised at 8 days old. Why is that number significant? The sign of the covenant God made with Abraham that he would make him a father of many nations was that all male babies would be circumcised 8 days after they were born. For Paul to have been circumcised at this age would make him an ethnic Jew, separate from the Ishmaelites, the other son of Abraham, who were circumcised at 13, or Gentiles converted to Judaism who were circumcised as adults. No, no, Paul was the real deal Jew.

Second, he was from the people of Israel, the absolute purest line of Jewish people, who came from Jacob, later called Israel, from whom the nation was named.

Third, he was from the tribe of Benjamin; this was the most elite of all of the tribes of Israel. Benjamin was Jacob’s baby boy and the first born in the Promised Land. The first king of the Israelites, Saul, was

from the tribe of Benjamin. And in the book of Esther, Mordecai, the one who saved Israel from the Persians came from the tribe of Benjamin. It was an important tribe.

Paul was born into the perfect storm of elite Jewish characteristics. He would be considered “of good stock.” If he were a dog or horse, he would be pedigreed. But Paul was not just born into the right family. He also did the right things.

Transition: So next, we are going to look at the different achievements that he accomplished during his early life which separated him from the average Israelite.

B) Achievements

Paul had done quite a bit in his short lifetime which made him stand out over and above the average Jew. In many senses, he had earned the right to proud of himself; he had worked very hard to be devout and righteous. **First** Paul said that he was a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents. This statement didn’t have so much to do with ethnicity as it did with his bilingual abilities. By the time that the Israelites returned from exile and then were put under Roman rule with Greek speaking influence, very few could still speak the Hebrew language. It took effort to learn and speak and a lot of intentionality to retain.

Second, Paul was a trained Pharisee. This word literally means “separated ones.” Even in its title Paul is distinguished as different from those around him. In order to become a Pharisee, one had to go through rigorous religious training with a Rabbi. And there were never

more than 6,000 Pharisees at a time. They were the elite religious leaders of the day.

Third, Paul was zealous. William Barclay writes that, “to a Jew, zeal was the greatest quality in the religious life.” Zeal was very prized in the Jewish religion, and in Paul’s zeal he persecuted, probably killed, and hated those who followed Christ as well as Christ himself.

Finally, Paul claims to be flawless in his righteousness. Now, this seems awful arrogant, and that wouldn’t be completely uncommon for Paul. But in this case, I don’t believe that Paul was trying to say that he was perfect/never did anything wrong; instead, he was commenting on his standing with the law, saying that as far as the law goes, there was nothing that he hadn’t done. In both the OT and NT, righteousness speaks of conforming to a norm. If you are able to follow “x” rules and standards, then you are righteous. Paul’s righteousness was determined by the way that he stuck to the law.

So, on top of Paul being the perfectly pedigreed Jew, he also acted the part. Everything about his person conformed to the highest standards of Judaism in the day. He was the Navy Seal of Judaism.

And yet in light of all that, which Paul recognizes as being perfectly good reasons to boast, he instead turns away from his former self to embrace Jesus Christ. I think that it is alright to ask why? Why would Paul reject those things which made him such a religious great in his day? Why couldn’t/didn’t he have his past and Jesus? He answers those questions in verses 7-9.

2) verses 7-9: All of that is nothing compared to the riches of Christ.

In verse seven, Paul makes a statement that, to the church in Philippi, would have been shocking. *"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."* Unfortunately for us, the notion of self-sacrifice as a part of the Christian life is well-known and probably common, so we don't get to experience that same shock, which makes it easier for us to be complacent about his message.

Why would anybody want to reject those achievements and qualities, one would ask? Paul was privileged; he should enjoy those things that most people could not. Barclay writes that, "All these things Paul might have claimed to set down on the credit side of the balance; but, when he met Christ, he wrote them off as nothing more than bad debts. The things that he had believed to be his glories were in fact quite useless." Bad debts. I think that there is something profound to that statement. How does somebody rake up bad debts? Time. It takes some time to accumulate debt so much that you ruin your credit. Paul had spent his entire life working towards being a devout Jew; this was a costly process, and it shaped who he was. And now, it was nothing more than bad debts.

But he doesn't just describe his qualities as a "loss." No, no, Paul goes on to elaborate just how worthless his past was. In verse 8, he says that, "I consider them garbage..." Paul uses the Greek word *skuballa*, which means "that which is thrown to dogs" or, in medical terminology which turns out to be a little bit more vulgar, it could mean "dung." In fact, the KJV translates it as "dung." Just say that word, *Skuballa*. Even when not translated, it sounds nasty. The Message version of vs. 8 reads, "The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for." Paul does not

mince words on making sure that the reader understands how he feels about his past.

By why are Paul's qualities garbage? These don't seem like bad things, really. In verse 9, Paul tells us that these things mean nothing because they cannot get us to God. Nothing that we do can gain the righteousness of Christ; it is only because of God's love that we receive grace.

Transition: Paul's own experience was unique to that time period; he was trying to reach God through strict adherence to the law. The law defined his life. What is it that defines us? In what ways do we try to rely on ourselves or our own works, rather than God? Is being "good enough" going to get us to God/heaven? If not, then what are we supposed to do?

Big Idea:

In order to reach out and grasp our prize, heaven, and to fulfill the life that God calls us to, we have to turn away from our old selves, find our worth in Christ, and continue the race towards God.

3) 10-14:

Paul tells us in vs. 10 that he desires to "know" Christ. Merriam-Webster online defines "know" as "to perceive" or "be aware of." Our modern understanding of "know" is something that we do with our senses. It is very much from the perspective of an observer rather than a participant.

In the Hebrew, the word used for "to know" was "yada," which actually meant to know in an intimate sense. Regarding husband and wife, it

was a word used to describe sex, as in Genesis 4:1 “Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” Later on, the Greek understanding of “to know” still contained intimate connotations. To know Christ was not just to have a mental idea of Him, it was to know him personally. Paul wanted to know Christ, he wanted to feel and experience the things that Christ did.

Our desire too, should not just be to know “about” Christ, but to truly know him. Paul says “I want to know Christ.” I find comfort in his certainty. He knows what’s going to really complete his life. He tried for so long to find fulfillment in self-imposed religiosity, and now he is going to find it in the grace of Christ. How many of us can say that we truly know what we want or can be certain that what we want is going to make us whole?

Then, in vs. 14, Paul says that he wants to press forward to take hold of what Christ has taken hold of for him. Paul recognizes that Christ “took hold of” a calling for him, and for everybody, and he is now “straining” as he says to fulfill that calling.

And it is this calling, this “prize” that makes Paul who he is supposed to be, not his former self.

He says “I press on toward the goal to win the prize.” The Greek word used here, “epekteinomenos” envisions a racer striving for the finish line and seeing nothing else but the goal ahead. At one of the cross country events earlier this year, I was watching the junior high girls finish up their two miles, and Grace Buschur started the last fifty yards toward the finish line. I wanted to “encourage” her, so I yelled something like, “Grace, you better hurry up or I’m going to start chasing you.” You know what, she didn’t even acknowledge me. It could’ve

been because she was so focused on the goal ahead that everything else fell into the background. Of course, she could've been ignoring me too, but I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. In life, our final prize is reconciliation to God, it is heaven, and we don't have time to mess around with the petty things of this world, we've got a race to finish.

Like we spoke about last week, faith is a journey, which goes one day at a time. Our Christian lives are like rays. Sometimes, they might look like sign curves, with our ups and downs. But the point is that we are constantly on this road, one day at a time. Sometimes we have our good days, and sometimes we have our bad days, but we must continue to focus on the end.

But now we reach the next step in the journey, turning away from our old selves. The message is called "Total Eclipse of Our Pride" because when I was thinking of the words, "turn away," I couldn't help but think about the Bonnie Tyler song "Total Eclipse of the Heart," in which she sings "turn around." But the more I thought about it, I think that's a perfect illustration of what we're talking about here. An eclipse is the only time during the year that you can really look at the sun without burning your retinas out. It takes a covering. In order for us to truly understand and see what God has in store for us, our self and our pride has to be eclipsed by Jesus Christ. (Possibly illustrate this on the white board)

What in the life of Paul resonates with us? What can we relate to? Again, what are the things that define our lives and who we are? They aren't necessarily going to be obvious or even bad. If you look over Paul's list of credentials, none of the things that he talks about are

inherently evil. In fact, they would have been encouraged and highly prized by his contemporaries.

What is it that is important to us? What makes us who we are, really? Is it jobs, family, friends, money, possessions, abilities, nationalism? Are we willing to take a serious look at ourselves and consider what we might need to turn away from? Think outside the box, when we die, how important will all of these things really be? In the face of eternity, these years we spend on earth are so short, but they are significant. How do we make them count?

It is not enough to start down the road of faith, but we have to be willing to give ourselves fully to the race, straining forward to reach our prize. And this means that we have to give up those eternally insignificant things that are so important to us right now, realizing that there is so much more meaning in Christ.

Big Idea:

Here's the truth, In order to reach out for the prize, to fulfill the life that God calls us to, we have to turn away from our old selves, discover our worth in Christ, and continue the race towards God.