

Depending on where you live in the United States, they’re called tag sales; yard sales; garage sales, or rummage sales. They all describe the same thing: someone is selling off items that were once important but have now lost their value. The word “rubbish” sounds a lot like “rummage” and you may indeed find rubbish at a rummage sale. I’m talking about this because one of the most influential Christians of all time used a word like “rubbish” to describe his life before knowing Jesus. As we see why he did that, we will also be invited to consider if there’s some rubbish of our own that could stand to be thrown out.

In today’s epistle lesson, Paul is writing a small autobiography. As he looks back, he recalls what he used to regard as central to his identity, and he said, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” “Confidence in the flesh”: In other words, confidence in my own ability to be good; to be good enough to get somewhere with God. And if such a thing were possible, Paul is saying: “It was me. Let me count the ways.”

Paul says he was “circumcised on the eighth day.” That’s exactly how it should have been for a Jewish male child. They were supposed to receive that mark of the covenant one week after they were born. Good start. Then he says, “of the people of Israel.” Again, exactly as it’s supposed to be. Paul has the right DNA.

Next, “of the tribe of Benjamin.” Benjamin was one of the most important tribes of Israel, very prominent. Paul’s birth name had been Saul. It so happens that the most famous person to come out of the tribe of Benjamin was King Saul, the first king of Israel. Next, “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” He had impeccable ancestry. “As to the law, a Pharisee.” Paul was as learned and credentialled as you could be in rabbinic Judaism. Paul continues: “As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.” It doesn’t get much more zealous than hunting people down and throwing them in prison.

Paul then concludes this list: “As to righteousness under the law, blameless.” If anybody could have made it by observing the law, by keeping it and presenting his resume to God for acceptance, Paul says, it was me!

But is that where Paul locates his trust—in himself? He goes on, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish.” “Rubbish”! That’s a pretty strong word! The Greek word here is interesting. It’s “skybala,” which is even stronger than just “rubbish.” “Skybala” is a word that was used for, well, to put it politely, excrement. The apostle gets a PG rating getting his point across.

Why such a strong statement? It’s not because some of these things were bad in themselves. There was nothing inherently wrong with being circumcised, or an Israelite, or being from the tribe of Benjamin. The problem was that Paul had been justifying himself because of them. He was, as he put it, putting confidence in the flesh and his own ability to do good. Then, he had an

experience that caused him to call all that stuff “skybala.” He came face to face with Someone who was better than good.

What about you? Are there things you have relied on for your standing with God that really should be put in the rubbish pile? Maybe you’ve thought: “If anyone has a right to say he’s a good Lutheran, it would be me. Look at me: Born and raised in the Missouri Synod. I went to a Lutheran school. I memorized all 306 questions in the blue catechism. In German.”

Or maybe you put your confidence in other things: “Hey, I’m a pretty good person. Never done drugs or gotten in trouble with the law. In fact, I do good in the community. People respect me. I haven’t done anything to have God be mad at me. I kind of expect things to go well for me, because, well, I deserve it.” But that’s still putting confidence in the flesh and Paul, in a very disarming way, calls his own personal resume “skybala.” Why? Because. There is something far better than his best effort. And ours, as well.

Paul writes, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order 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 comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

There is Paul’s righteousness, and there is your right-ness; your goodness. It belongs to Jesus, and He’s given it to you. The strength of that should be obvious: no matter how good a resume you put together for yourself, there are things you would leave off. Jesus doesn’t have to do that. His record is spotless, and the wonder of the gospel is, you can have His record. How? By letting go of the idols of your heart—the type of things Paul called rubbish—and trusting that Jesus’ goodness, His perfect goodness, is yours. That’s what faith in Christ consists of.

Here’s what Jesus did to produce a perfect record: He was “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Unlike Paul, Jesus was not from the tribe of Benjamin. He was from the tribe of Judah, because he was a descendent of David, the great king from whom the Messiah would come. And Jesus was, is, the Messiah, the Christ, the great deliverer sent from heaven to establish an everlasting kingdom of blessing. And “as to righteousness under the law”? Jesus truly was “blameless.” He did everything he was supposed to, and he didn’t leave anything out. And instead of claiming special privileges for himself because of His achievement, He set up an incredible exchange.

Jesus takes your sins. You get his perfect record. It happened on the cross.

If you’ve ever seen the TV series “Antiques Roadshow,” you know that sometimes it features a person who purchased a painting \$5.00. And now it turns out to be worth \$500,000. Well, you and I and St. Paul have discovered something far greater. We have gotten rid of some rubbish, and in exchange, we have picked up a treasure. It’s yours through faith in Christ, and it will keep its value for eternity.