

“What Does Your Resume Look Like?”

Philippians 3:4B-14
A Sermon from the First Pew of
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Matt Matthews

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I hear something lonely and sad in these verses from Philippians. I think Paul and Mildred Cory and her daughter, Tina, have something terribly in common. They think that God loves them based only on their merit and achievement. They think that in order to belong to God, they needed to earn worthiness. And to earn worthiness with God requires something they don't have.

Paul gives us his resume in this chapter from Philippians. He's a good, faithful person. He was born into the right family. He's a pharisee. He's perfect.

Imagine how much work it takes to keep that image of perfection polished. Paul balances all the plates and can juggle all the balls. But I look at this perfect Paul and I feel so sorry for him. He must feel the whole world is on his shoulders. And certainly he knows he can't keep this up.

Mildred Cory can't pretend to be perfect any more—if she ever did. Her world has come crashing down. Mildred is a character from Michael Lindvall's book of stories called *The Good News from North Haven* (Anchor Press). The pastor finds her crying alone in the sanctuary after worship.

Through her tears she tells the pastor that she has a new grandson and is thinking about his baptism. The pastor tells her to have her daughter, Tina, the baby's mother to give him a call. He will settle on baptism dates with Tina and her husband.

“Tina's got no husband,” Mildred said. “She's eighteen . . . she started to see this older boy.” She hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. “She got pregnant and the boy joined the Air Force and she decided to keep the baby and she wants to have him baptized here but she's nervous to come talk to you.”

Tina is what the Apostle Paul is going to look like when he drops all the plates and he finds his perfection is impossible to keep up. Paul says he's perfect, but he's not. And when he discovers he's not, his world is going to come crashing down.

Like Tina's world

Having a baby at 18 wasn't in her plan. This wasn't her plan. She didn't know what to do next. She felt ill-equipped. She felt needy. She felt embarrassment and shame. She may have had the perfect resume—but not now. Not anymore.

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The Session approved the baptism, but not before Angus McDowell, mister-we've-never-done-it-this-way-before, kept shaking his head, saying over and over again: A teenaged, unwed mother? A father who would be a no-show? The Session approved the baptism, but others agreed with Angus McDowell: 18-year-old Tina's circumstances, sadly, didn't fit the norm.

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"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

I hear something sad and lonely as Paul brags about his resume.

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When a child is baptized in this story's small church, it is the custom for all the family to stand with the child. It's a big deal. A real celebration. The Aunts stand. The uncles stand. Family is invited from out of town. Rows are reserved in the sanctuary. At the baptism, the grandparents, cousins, siblings, and the whole family stands. They all stand.

Tina was nervous about the upcoming baptism. She was nervous because the only family she had in town was her mom. And no family from out of town was going to come because the family had disowned Tina. *You've made your bed, now lie in it.* There would be no grandparents. No Cousins. The baby's father wouldn't be there. Tina and her sad mother would be all alone on the Sunday when little Jimmy was baptized.

And Tina was nervous. Tina was nervous because she didn't measure up. People would judge her. She had no resume. No Harvard. No Yale. She didn't have the nice clothes. She didn't have the credentials. She wasn't worthy.

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The day arrived. An elder announced, "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism." Down the aisle she came shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. Everybody hurt for her. For Tina. For Tina's baby. Somebody may have thought this—*There but by the grace of God go I*, but nobody dared say it.

The minister asked, 'Who stands with this child?'

Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself and took her place next to Tina and little Jimmy.

(You know where this story is going, because I've told you this story before...)

The pastor began to ask Tina the baptismal questions, when he became aware of disruptive movement in the pews. *Were people leaving?* He looked up. Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy" (p. 168-175).

They came down the side aisles and the center aisles to stand by, with, and for this teenaged mom and her little baby.

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Paul reminds the church in Philippi that no matter how good your resume is—and his was the best—no matter how self-sufficient you think you are, you can never earn God's favor. You can never earn God's favor because God has favored you all along. For the Christian, the most profound sign of this favor is Jesus.

Paul says, "Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant" (The Message). So, because of God's gift, I don't have to go it alone. Because of God's grace, it's not all up to me.

Paul learns that God's grace has nothing to do with Paul's resume. Grace has nothing to do with Paul's achievement. Grace has nothing to do with Paul's birth status. Grace has nothing to do with who-you-know, how you dress, what you drive. The grace of God is all about God: God's initiative, God's decision, God's will, God's plan. *No ours.*

Paul is telling the church at Philippi, press on through hardship and struggle, press on by doing what is right and righteous, press on by reaching out for reconciliation. Press on by being an attentive neighbor. Press on in your efforts to widen your circle of friends. Press on in walking the walk God has called upon you to walk. Be yourself. Know that God loves you. Have hope and be hopeful. God's got this and God's got you. Be the church. Worship God. Lean on God. Learn about God. Celebrate God. Grow together as the body of Christ. Stand with each other in the power of the Spirit.

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And that's what Tina experienced on the day little Jimmy was baptized. All those people standing closely by. They leaned in for a closer look, and Tina saw the love of their eyes reflected in the eyes of her newborn baby.

Tina wasn't alone on that special day. God stood with the people of that congregation. They stood with that wonderful, wonderful young woman. And she was wonderful not because she had earned it or had the perfect resume. She was wonderful because she was a child of God—and all the people standing with her knew that all along.

"Look," Paul says, "I am reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me."

Here at this table we find we are standing with lonely Tina, her baby, and her mom. We're standing with Angus and Minnie McDowell. We're standing with all the people of God. Our parents and grandparents are at this table. The whole communion of saints. Those with and those without a good resume are invited and have come.

We come to this table and find that Jesus has been waiting for us all along. We find we are one body in *his* body.

And we hear the ancient words of Paul, "I am reaching out for Christ," Paul says, "who has so wondrously reached out for me."

Thanks be to God.

PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14

4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in

him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.