

### ***Who's Keeping Score?***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Emperor and self-proclaimed military genius, once declared that “*Men are led with baubles and ribbons*”. Napoleon found that he could take a young man by force, slap a uniform on him, train him how to drill, and march him off to a battlefield someplace, where, perhaps vague notions of patriotism—but more far more importantly, the threat of being shot as a deserter if he broke ranks and fled—might keep him from running away under fire. What Napoleon found astonishing, though, was that if he then took that same young man (provided he survived his first battle, of course) and pinned some gaudy trinket to his chest while making a few remarks about bravery and honor, then that soldier would follow him with loyalty and unflagging devotion to the farthest corner of earth and happily lay down his life if asked. He'd put up with any hardship, starvation, cold, or misery, if only he received a word of praise and another bit of ribbon to wear on his uniform now and then.

Speaking as a former military man myself, though I think Napoleon's comments are a little overstated, I find a lot of truth in what he said. I remember the first time I put on a military dress uniform. At first I felt very self-conscious: kind of like a Christmas tree—decked out with all the shiny buttons, branch insignia, and arm patches ... the only thing missing were the twinkling lights. And that was even before I'd earned any honors of my own to display. Still, I can't deny that there was a surge of patriotic pride in simply wearing in the uniform of my country. Ah, but then you get that first ribbon—the one that basically means “thanks for being here” – but boy it sure looks good there. And then over time you get a few more that actually mean something. They represent some achievement or job well done: like the little Maltese cross that means you're qualified to shoot a rifle and throw grenades, or in my case, that shiny pair of jump wings that announced to the world that I was parachute qualified. What it meant to me was that I survived being screamed at a lot, doing thousands of pushups, and having someone shove me out of an airplane five times. But let me tell you, those little trinkets do make your chest swell. And before long you learn to read the other guy's chests – and you begin to understand what all those rows and rows of stuff on the Sergeant Major's uniform mean. Here's a guy who's been serving for thirty years, and you can tell at a glance that he's been everywhere, done everything, and done it right—and you're impressed. You think, “Maybe someday I'll have all that to *my credit*.” And you're willing to work awfully hard to get there.

And this doesn't apply only to military people, of course. Sportsmen collect trophies to put on their mantles; scholars collect diplomas to hang on their walls ... what's the county fair if not a forum to show off achievements in raising livestock, baking pies, and putting up preserves? The makers of films, television programs and music never seem to tire of coming up with new awards to give to each other: there have Oscars, Tonys, Golden Globes, People's Choice Awards, Screen Actors Guild Awards, and more ... and every year the list seems to get longer. Even parents and grandparents have a prominent place in their home where they display the photos of their families. It's a sort of trophy wall that proves “I did a good job as a parent”, and through which they can vicariously share in the achievements of their offspring.

Mind you, I'm not critiquing any of this; I'm merely attempting to demonstrate that we are all natural scorekeepers. In whatever field of endeavor we participate, we want to be able to measure our achievements. And we do it because we find our value and sense of self worth in what we have done and what we have to show for it. So we collect the baubles and ribbons that

pertain to the things we do because they prove to ourselves and to everyone else “*I’m somebody. Just look at what I have achieved.*” They are the scoreboards we turn to in those reflective moments when we feel the need to take stock and ask the question, “*So far, what have I done with my life?*”

And since we keep these scoreboards with respect to our educations, careers, hobbies, homes, and families, it comes as no surprise that we keep the score in our spiritual lives as well. We all know how we are doing on the religious scoreboard. We know what trophies we’ve earned: like Baptism, Confirmation, a certain attendance record, the “campaigns we’ve fought”, and the various forms of meritorious service we’ve done for the church and the community. And we know which medals we’d still like to get. But because we learned along the way that humility is a virtue that’s valued in the church, the spiritual baubles and ribbons we’ve accumulated are not likely to be prominently displayed—but we know what they are, and we sure like it when someone else notices them despite our half-hearted efforts to conceal them. And for the most part, we keep score on others too. When we look at each other we are reading uniforms exactly like soldiers do. The biggest difference is that on a military uniform everyone sees the same thing; when we look at each other’s spiritual uniforms, the wearer usually sees more than anyone else.

In this morning’s Epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul is talking about his religious service record. And if first century Jews wore uniforms, then Paul would have been the Audie Murphy of the faith. (For the information of the younger generation, Audie Murphy was the most highly decorated American soldier in WWII.) Paul describes himself as a fanatically faithful son of the Mosaic Law. He studied under the best rabbis, and he devoted himself to scrupulously keeping every detail of God’s Law as well as all the traditions of his people. He was a staunch defender of the faith, fighting fearlessly against those who opposed it or tried to water it down. Paul claims that he’d earned his bragging rights, and that no one could have challenged his record. Instead, he was like that old Sergeant Major, whose service record displayed on his uniform so impressed the young troops that they dedicated their lives to trying to get one like it.

But then, having just presented his impeccable record and astronomically high religious score, Paul says he considers it all nothing but a pile of stinking rubbish. That’s the euphemism we get in the English translation, anyway. Actually, in a deliberate effort to shock his readers, Paul uses a scatological term that’s far more vulgar than that – one that makes it absolutely clear that he despises everything he’d done and every honor he had achieved. Why? Because, he says, it all stood in the way of knowing Jesus Christ and the righteousness that comes through faith in him.

“I tried as hard as I could to be perfect before God”, he says, “and I can honestly say that I came as close as is humanly possible—and then I met Jesus Christ, and I saw what a fool I had been. I thought I was doing extremely well; but then I found out that not only was I not on the scoreboard, I had an infinitely negative score and no way to earn a single point. All my best efforts and hard work were directed toward a lost cause. I was headed exactly the wrong way. I was only digging a deeper hole. But now I know Jesus and the infinitely superior achievements he accomplished—achievements he freely shares with me simply because I know and trust him.”

Imagine being a highly decorated soldier in the German Nazi SS in WWII, or being someone high up in the ranks and honors of the Ku Klux Klan back in its heyday, and then being confronted with and convicted of the truth about the evil that you were working in the world. Imagine the shock and shame. Imagine the guilt you would feel and how you would

think you'd completely wasted and ruined your life. That's how Paul felt about all his great religious achievements. And that's how we too should feel about our own religious scoreboards. The reason is that whenever we focus on what we are doing for God, or what we are doing to earn points for ourselves in a spiritual sense, we push aside the achievements of Jesus Christ on our behalf, which are the only things that matter. All that we have that counts before God is what he has given to us in Christ. Anything we bring in – even the best we think we have to offer – is to our own discredit and disgrace.

Now that may sound harsh; but it actually works for our good. What we do apart from Christ is always sin. And you know that in addition to stocking our spiritual trophy cases, as we go through life we also keep track of items that belong hanging in the hall of shame. I'm talking about those sins from our past—and yes, those in the present—that keep haunting us: the things we've done that we are ashamed of, sometimes secret things that we fear may one day be revealed, and things so well hidden that they may never come to the light of day. But we know that God knows, and we fear in our hearts that sooner or later he will address them. The good news is that God is not keeping score. If he does not keep track of the good things we falsely imagine we've accomplished, neither does he remember our most vile and despicable acts. Ever since Christ took hold of you by faith, God has never seen anything in you except for Jesus and his sinless perfection.

And the danger of realizing this important truth is that you will stop. The sin nature in all of us wants to say, "Well, if nothing good I do matters, then I'm not going to do anything. And if my sins are all forgotten – even the ones I haven't committed yet – then why should I stop sinning?" But that is not where Paul goes in his line of argument. Instead he says this: "If by knowing and trusting Jesus I am reckoned righteous before God, if knowing Jesus is what gives me his sinless perfection, then I am going to make it my goal to know him better." For Paul, knowing that he is inadequate and that he has nothing to bring the Lord, gives him an intense sense of urgency to deepen his relationship with Jesus his Savior. He writes, "*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. I want to share in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, so that by every means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead for myself. ... I'm not there yet, and so I press on ... Forgetting what is behind, both my so-called accomplishments and my sins, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for which God has called me upward in Christ Jesus.*"

You can feel his passion in these words. He hungers and thirsts for a closer walk with the Lord. He wants to follow in Jesus' footsteps, and sit at his feet listening to his words. He wants to sit at the table with him, and enjoy the fellowship of his love; and he wants to share in the burdens that the Lord bears even today, as he comforts and serves the sick, the lost, and the helpless. And he's willing to suffer with Christ in the process.

But the point is that we can do these things. We can listen to Jesus, grow in his wisdom, and learn to know him better as we spend time in his Word. We can come eat and drink at his table and receive his love and forgiveness. We can let him work in us to give us his own heart of compassion. And if we're called, we too can suffer with Christ as we take a stand on his truth and display his love in a world filled with opposition.

Some years ago, I traded in my military uniform with all its baubles and ribbons for this plain white robe. I wear it—all of our Pastors wear one over black clothing—to symbolize the sinners we are and the perfect righteousness Christ gives to all who know and trust in him. It is meant as a visual reminder to you and to me of how the Lord does not look at the achievements of the individual nor their sins; but rather that he sees all of us through the cross of Jesus where

he shed his innocent blood to cleanse us and make us pure and holy before him. My prayer today is that the Lord will give to all of us the insight and wisdom of St. Paul to count as trash all the good that we imagined we've done, and to forget all that lies behind, so that we keep our focus always, only on Jesus and the righteousness that comes through faith in him. And I pray too that he may give us the passion to fervently pursue a deeper relationship with Jesus so that we too may press forward to win the goal for which God has called all of us upward in Christ Jesus. May God grant it to us for his sake. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***