

March 30, 2025 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Invest Wisely!

I would like to build a bridge across Lake Michigan. So many people complain about driving through Chicago. If we had a bridge across the lake, we could avoid Chicago on our way to Michigan or Indiana. So, would you please give me a donation. A few billion dollars each should get us started. ... Do you think they'll ever be able to build a bridge across Lake Michigan? Not at all. If you gave me money to build a bridge, it would be wasted. That would be bad investment. When you make a spiritually bad investment, the results can be eternally tragic. This morning we hear the encouragement to invest wisely.

The congregation in the city of Philippi in northern Greece was sad to hear that the Apostle Paul was under house arrest in Rome. They took up a collection and sent him a gift. Paul wrote them a "Thank you" letter. He also gave them some spiritual encouragement as he reviewed who Jesus was and what he did. Some people in Philippi thought that in order to be saved, they had to have faith in Jesus AND follow some of the Old Testament ceremonial laws, like circumcision and eating kosher. That would be a bad investment. They would be trusting in their works instead of in Jesus alone and they would miss out on salvation. They would be like the workers in the vineyard in today's Gospel who rejected the owner's son.

It is easy for us to shake our heads at those people in Philippi who were trusting in Old Testament ceremonies, but the danger is still very real for us – not following Old Testament rules, but trusting in good things that we do. The thoughts pop into our mind so easily.

- "I've been a member of this church for decades."
- "I get to church nearly every Sunday."
- "I give a decent percentage as an offering."
- "I say more prayers."
- "I'm the pastor. That's got to count for something."
- "I do a lot to help at church."
- "I don't get drunk."
- "I read Meditations every day." Etc.

Those are all good things, but if you think they earn you some credit points with God or make you better than others, then you are investing in your works. That's like a guy wearing a t-shirt that says, "Jesus loves all

people. But I'm his favorite." Last week, my friend sent me a comic which said there will be an especially nice place in heaven for those who went to mid-week Lenten services. You kind of chuckle, but it reflects the thinking that our good works earn us something with God. That's investing in ourselves. Whenever we point to the good things we have done, we are not pointing to Jesus. That's not investing wisely.

To those in Philippi who were trusting in keeping some Old Testament ceremonial laws, Paul explained that he could boast more than they could (:5,6); **"Circumcised on the eighth day, 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."** He had an impressive record as a Jew, but he continued by explaining that none of that mattered. Think of a guy who took all of his retirement saving and bought as many Beanie Babies as he could because he heard that some people paid thousands of dollars for Beanie Babies. But then he learns that was in the early '90s during the Beanie Babies craze. Now they are worth about a nickel each at a garage sale. His retirement savings are worthless. Likewise, Paul said that he considered all of his Jewish accomplishments a (:7) **"loss."** And again, (:9), **"I consider them garbage."**

Instead of trusting or boasting in his goodness, Paul said that he wanted (:9), **"the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."** That's a powerful phrase worth a closer look. Paul wants **"righteousness."** In other words, he wants to be able to stand before God free from all sin and any worry of hell all because of Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect, righteous, life and through faith transferred it to Paul and all believers. This righteousness **"comes from God."** We don't go shopping for it or plant it in our gardens or go to the factory or shop to earn it. It's like coming home and finding an Amazon package on your porch. You did not order it, or pay for it, or sign for it. It's simply given to you. This righteousness is **"on the basis of faith."** Faith is trust in the heart. It is an attitude that God himself gives us. What a comfort and joy to know that because of Jesus, we are righteous. If you were to have a heart attack and die tonight, you know you would be in heaven. There's nothing to worry about. By God's grace, you have invested in Jesus. That's investing wisely.

To many in the world, Jesus looks like an insignificant life coach, or advisor, or example of love. Could his life on earth been any more humble?

Born in a barn in Bethlehem. Raised in Nazareth. Little to no money. No house or property. His disciples were a motley crew of misfits. He was rejected by the spiritual leaders, handed over to the Romans, brutalized, beaten, unfairly condemned, crucified and buried in a borrowed tomb. Professional sports teams will invest a lot of money in some star athletes. From an earthly perspective you would not invest in Jesus.

In Romania (just south of Ukraine) a woman found a stone in a riverbed that she liked. She brought it home to use as a doorstep for decades.<sup>1</sup> Recently, she died and her relatives took over the house. One of the relatives noticed the stone and guessed that it was more than a normal rock. He took it to some geologists who instantly recognized it as one of the largest known amber nuggets in the world, valued at over \$1 million. It used to hold an old lady's door open. Now it is in a museum and has been classified as a national treasure. It did not look like much, but it was very valuable. Jesus did not look like much from an earthly perspective, but he is the most valuable person in the history of the world. He is worth investing all you have. Salvation lasts beyond death. Watch your heart that you do not trust in your goodness. Your works and mine don't earn anything from God. Stay focused on Jesus, the Savior we need.

Paul continued his encouragement to keep investing in Jesus in :10,11, **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>and so, somehow [whatever way I end up dying], attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”** Paul knew that hanging on to Jesus and telling others about him was going to mean suffering and hardship. We become like Jesus in his death

- when we endure the scorn and ridicule and even at times the physical persecution of the hostile world,
- when we keep saying “no” to our sinful, selfish nature with its lusts and desires [It's not easy to fight sin and temptation. Challenge yourself to see how you can improve your Christian living this week.], and
- when we joyfully and without complaining follow Jesus on our path of suffering and trouble through life in this this world until we get to the glory of heaven.

In case you haven't noticed, we are not in heaven yet. Neither was the Apostle Paul when he wrote this letter. He explained (:12,13,14), **“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on. ... I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind [all his sins and hardships] and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.”** What an encouragement! What an example! He presses on. He strains forward. Being a Christian means constant effort. We need to be constantly turning our back on our sins and not letting the devil nag us, as we work harder and harder at growing in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As we walk with Jesus, we are investing in him, trusting him with our future.

It might be neat if there was a bridge across Lake Michigan. Far greater is having Jesus as our bridge between life on this earth and life in heaven. Paul finishes this section by referencing the (:14) **“prize [heaven] for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** What a wonderful reminder that salvation is all a gift from God. He is the one who called each of us to faith. He is the one who called us with heaven as the goal, the prize, which we will enjoy forever. It all depends on Jesus and he already accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. He is worth more than anyone or anything in our lives. He is the eternal life investment that God has given to us. Be careful about trusting in your own goodness as you stay focused on Jesus as you invest wisely. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-09-03/elderly-romanian-woman-used-amber-nugget-worth-over-1-million-as-a-doorstop-for->