

Notice that when Paul says, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain,” he does not say, “Living is Christ *and...*” He does not say, “Living is Christ and comfort,” or “Living is Christ and success,” or “Living is Christ and security.” He says that *living is Christ*. Full stop. His is Paul’s version of Stephen Covey’s famous dictum: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Paul declutters his life, reducing it to this one essential: living is Christ and dying is gain. That sentence only makes sense when everything else is stripped away. Paul is in prison, his freedom gone, his reputation contested, and his future uncertain; yet he does not despair. His thinking is clear because clarity comes not when life gives him more, but when life takes things away.

Paul looks honestly at the two possibilities before him: life or death. Remarkably, he refuses to romanticize either one. If Paul lives it will mean “fruitful labor” preaching the Gospel of Christ. Not an easy life, but a life of work, service, and responsibility to others. If Paul dies, it will mean being “with Christ,” which he calls “far better.” Death is not something Paul feared. What allows Paul to speak this way is not indifference to life, but *freedom from cluttered values*. Paul decided what matters most: Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:22). Everything else is secondary.

This gets even clearer when we remember that just two chapters later, Paul revisits his life résumé: his Jewish heritage, his religious achievements, and his impressive credentials. Paul dismisses these things with a shocking word: *skubala*: rubbish, refuse, garbage, manure. These things are not evil, but they did interfere with Paul’s deepest goal: the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, his Lord (Philippians 3:8). Paul practiced a kind of spiritual minimalism when he repeatedly asked, “Does this serve Christ?” Anything that doesn’t serve Christ, even if it once mattered deeply, goes into the discard pile. For Paul, clarity about life and death flows from this ruthless simplicity. When Christ is the center, life and death no longer compete but are held within the same purpose of serving Christ.

Paul admits to the Philippians that his desire is “to depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23). That would be simpler, cleaner, and less painful; but simplicity isn’t the same as faithfulness. Paul continues, “But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (Philippians 1:24). This is a striking turn. Paul doesn’t choose based on what he wants most, but on what the community needs most. His life is no longer oriented around personal fulfillment, but around *communal responsibility*.

This is where Paul’s minimalism becomes costly. When we clear out our spiritual clutter, we imagine that the reward will be peace and rest, and an easier life. But for Paul, the result of this decluttering is *greater availability*. Freedom doesn’t lead Paul away from

others; it binds him more deeply to them. Paul will remain “for your progress and joy in faith” (Philippians 1:25). Progress and joy are not individual achievements, but shared realities. Paul’s presence with the Philippians community matters. His continued life becomes a gift he offers in the service of others.

This challenges the myth that the goal of simplification is personal comfort. Paul shows us something different: The goal of gospel simplicity is usefulness. When life is cluttered with ego, fear, ambition, self-protection, or stuff we have little room for others. When life is streamlined to Christ as the core, we suddenly have more room: room to stay, room to serve, and room to endure for the sake of someone else’s faith. Paul’s willingness to remain is not giving up or giving in; it is totally above love for the Philippian church. Paul recognizes that life, however challenging, is still fruitful when it is given away in love.

Paul then pivots from his personal dilemma to the life of the faithful community: “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). The word Paul uses carries a sense of citizenship. By our faith in Christ Jesus, we are already citizens of God’s unfolding realm. Let your public life and your shared life reflect what you truly value, says Paul; let your lives be shaped by Christ’s Gospel. Worthy living is not perfection or prestige; worthy living is standing firm in one spirit; working side by side with one mind; and refusing to be frightened by opposition. Notice Paul does not mention individual achievement; instead, he describes a community that is unified, resilient, and courageous together.

Cluttered communities fracture easily. When churches are weighed down by competing agendas, unexamined fears, and inherited baggage, unity becomes fragile; but when the gospel is central, when Christ-like living is clearly the goal, much of that clutter loses its power. Paul insists that opposition itself may be a sign of faithfulness. The very pressures that frighten others become, paradoxically, evidence of salvation at work; not because suffering is good, but because suffering reveals what cannot be taken from us. When everything nonessential is stripped away, what remains is faith anchored in Christ.

Paul’s words unsettle modern ears: “For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering for him as well” (Philippians 1:29). We are comfortable calling faith a gift. We are less comfortable calling suffering a gift. Paul does not separate the two. Both belief and suffering belong to the same calling. Both draw us into deeper dependence. Both loosen our grip on false securities. Suffering, in Paul’s view, isn’t random punishment, it’s participation. The Philippians are experiencing “the same struggle” they saw in Paul and now they hear that he still endures. Their lives are being shaped by the same gospel pattern: loss that leads to life, surrender that leads to joy.

Here again, the metaphor of decluttering helps us. Suffering forces decisions. Suffering exposes what we carry that cannot sustain us. Suffering strips away illusions of control and self-sufficiency. No one seeks suffering, but suffering can become the moment when faith is clarified. What remains when much is taken away is what truly matters. Paul’s words are not abstract theology: they are the testimony of someone who has taken out the trash. “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Philippians 1:21). What needs to be cleared out of our lives for us to say the same thing with honesty? What ambitions interfere with our obedience? What fears clutter our courage? What possessions, habits, or identities limit our availability to others?

The gospel doesn’t merely help us organize what we already have. It calls us to let go. It frees us from carrying what no longer serves Christ. This isn’t about simplicity for its own sake, but about freedom: freedom to live; freedom to stay when staying is hard; freedom to stand firm together; freedom to suffer without fear because Christ is at the center of our lives. When the garbage is gone, what remains is joy, courage, and a love that endures.

Paul’s testimony is not really about loss at all, but about gain: real, lasting gain that cannot be stored in a unit or cataloged on a résumé. “I press on,” he says, “to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me” (Philippians 3:12): the new and better and eternal life in Christ. The gospel Paul preaches is not one of cluttered achievement, but one of holy freedom; not one that asks us to hold on tighter, but one that teaches us when to let go. In a world overflowing with storage units and spiritual résumés, Paul’s words sound scandalous. Call it loss. Call it garbage. Let it go. Press on, knowing Christ is worth everything; and everything else, in comparison, is needless.

Prayer: God, there is no greater privilege or joy than to gain Christ and be found in him. May I always remember there is no lasting value and importance in the things esteemed by the world, in comparison with having Jesus as my portion and living for him. Thank You that he died for me so that by grace through faith in Christ, I am a child of God and given an eternal inheritance in him. Help me to say, without hesitation, that whatever things there are in my life that I gain, I count them all as loss for the sake of Christ Jesus my Lord. In his name, Amen.

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The Garbage Gospel

Sunday, October 4, 2026
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Philippians 3:4b-14

According to a recent report, one of the strongest sectors of the commercial real estate market in the United States is not high-tech data centers, sprawling Amazon distribution warehouses, or gleaming office towers. It is self-storage units: those long rows of metal doors, each one hiding boxes of stuff people think they still need. Furniture that doesn’t fit the new house. Clothing that no longer fits the old body. Tax files and bank statements we won’t throw away, just in case. Keepsakes we’ve outgrown but can’t part with. Entire buildings are devoted to holding things that no longer fit in our lives.

The average American home contains about *300,000 items* crowded into closets, garages, basements, and storage rooms we promise ourselves we will get to “someday.” An entire industry has grown to help us solve this dilemma with minimalism coaches, decluttering experts, and books and podcasts that teach us how to let go. The Swedes gave us “death cleaning”: clearing out our stuff so our loved ones don’t inherit our clutter. Even reality television turned hoarding into a cautionary tale: viewers watch people face a devastating truth: *I didn’t own these things; they owned me*.

Marie Kondo, an organizing consultant, asks a simple question: *Does this item spark joy?* Her question speaks to the heart of the problem: too much stuff interferes with the life we want to live. Clutter doesn’t just fill space; it drains energy, clouds focus, quietly steals our freedom, and dampens our joy. What makes Kondo’s question resonate so widely, especially in Western, consumption-heavy cultures, is that she reframed decluttering as a *values question*, not a storage problem. Tidying, she says, isn’t about having less, but about clearing away things that distract you from the life you want to live.

Kondo’s question blends with Paul’s text this morning. Paul doesn’t ask, “Does this spark joy?” but rather “Does this serve Christ?” Both are about discernment. Both insist that what we hold on to shapes who we become. Paul understands this more deeply than we might expect. Writing from prison, uncertain whether he will live or die, Paul strips life down to its essentials and offers one of the most bracing confessions in all of Scripture. Earlier Paul wrote, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Philippians 1:21). This is not an off-hand remark, but the voice of someone who threw out everything that got in the way. Paul is not rearranging the furniture of his faith; he’s hauling the non-spiritual garbage to the curb. What Paul encourages is nothing less than a holy decluttering of our lives.