

## THE POND SCUM WINS

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

There is a fact of existence in our society that speaks to how small and insignificant I am. I don't care who knows my name. I will tell it to anyone. It is even out there on the internet. But I guard my social security number carefully. It would be a disaster if it got out on the internet. In other words I am more important as a number than as a name. There are lots of Richard Myatts but only one with my number. There are so many millions of people in our country that I am just another number among them. That my number is more important than my name suggests a certain anonymous insignificance for me. I get a similar message from elections. I have begun to hate them. I am weary of all the campaigning that ranges from superficial to hypocritical to downright ugly, but that's not at the core of my dislike of elections. The heart of it is that I feel like voting just throws my insignificance in my face. Over the past few decades it seems like the issues and people I vote for almost always lose. No matter how faithfully I vote it makes about as much difference as saving up pennies to donate to the government to reduce our \$17 trillion debt. In other words, my vote makes no difference at all. It seems totally insignificant. It is like elections say repeatedly to me, "You don't matter."

I don't like that message. But it is one unfortunately I hear in a number of ways in life. You may, as well. And that leads me to something I want to discuss today. It is a downside of life issue that affects every single one of us. I guarantee you that many of your attitudes and actions are shaped by this thing more than you would like to think. It impacts you every single day of your life. We will find out about it by looking at 1 Corinthians 4:1-6 where we will see a remedy for what ails us.

### PAUL WAS JUDGED INSIGNIFICANT BY SOME

A Jewish religious leader from Tarsus named Saul, also known as Paul, has had enormous impact on human history. His letter to the Roman Christians alone has been one of the most important pieces of literature in the world. And this unimposing man was also the most prolific church planter in the early days of Christianity, the one who opened the European continent to the gospel. He is the source of such vital words as "the wages of sin is death," "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," "God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," "For it is by grace you have been saved," "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." I could go on indefinitely, but you get the point. This man was a giant who changed the course of the world.

It is astounding and dismaying, then, to learn that he was considered insignificant by people both outside and inside the early church. In 1 Corinthians 4:12-13. Paul wrote, "We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the entire world."

Paul was cursed, persecuted and slandered by the world. He was considered scum and refuse. While we were visiting Michael and Carissa in Mississippi we traveled to Pensacola and New Orleans. In our travels we passed a number of different bodies of water. We went by one arm of Mobile Bay that had a large portion of its surface covered with some sort of green algae. That scum covered area was immensely unappealing. It was disgusting to look at. Paul said in the eyes of his world he was like that pond scum. He was a disgusting nothing, at best provoking revulsion.

How do you think he felt about all of the rejection and abuse he suffered? This passage tells us that while he stood steadfast in the face of it, it hurt him. He felt the sting of rejection and unfair mistreatment as much as any other human being. He felt like he was being treated and regarded like pond scum. What had to really feel like a slap in the face was that even who had been led to faith in Christ by Paul, were also rejecting him.

In 1 Corinthians 4:3 Paul wrote, “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.” He said this because he was being judged critically by many in the church at Corinth. Some preferred the leadership of Apollos, some preferred Peter. They were willing to follow just about anyone other than Paul. They said all kinds of crummy things about him but 2 Corinthians 10:10 probably gets to the heart of it. They said, “His letters are weighty and forceful but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” They didn’t think he was charismatic enough as a leader and they thought he was not much of a speaker. He was dull and boring. They wanted someone exciting, someone dynamic, and Paul just didn’t measure up.

You know how it is when people have decided they don’t like someone. They just start piling on the negativity about the person, finding everything critical they can. That’s what they did to Paul. They started with saying he wasn’t powerful or dynamic enough, but once they had decided that they had to identify lots of other things that were wrong with him in order to bolster their case. So they claimed he was fickle, he says he’s going to do one thing then he does another. He’s always raising money. Some of the criticisms were absurd and even contradictory. While criticizing him for raising money they also slammed him because he didn’t accept financial support for himself!

It is galling to think of some arrogant early Christians who thought so highly of themselves that they said Paul was not good enough for them. It is appalling to know they were thinking, “Yeah, Paul had his place, I guess. After all he did help us get this church started. But he pretty much shot his wad there. That was all he had. When it comes to the standards we expect for a leader in our church here in Corinth he just doesn’t have what it takes.”

Not worthy. Not important enough. Not eloquent enough. Not talented enough. Not attractive enough. Not rich enough. Not intelligent enough. Not sophisticated enough. We’ve all experienced that kind of negative evaluation by someone and experienced the smallness it

makes us feel. Paul knew all about that. He was smack in the middle of the crosshairs of those kinds of judgments of him when he wrote both Corinthian letters.

## PAUL FOCUSED ON HIS REAL SIGNIFICANCE

### *He appealed to the “Supreme Court”*

This passage is crucial for anyone who wants to live a free, healthy and joyful life. If you don't care about that then you can skip the lessons of these verses. But if you want those things you must grasp how Paul responded to the rejection and criticism he faced.

Paul said in verse 4, “My conscience is clear.” In other words, I have done what God has given me to do with all my heart and all my strength. But he is not really trying to defend himself. The real heart of his response is at the end of verse 4. “It is the Lord who judges me.” That's why he cared very little if they judged him.

If you are paying any attention you know that Major League Baseball has had a recent significant change in its rules. They now have video review of umpire calls. I remember a time in my playing days when I wished that had been available at my games. On one particular occasion when I was in college I hit a ground ball into the hole between the shortstop and the third baseman. When I hit it I thought it might go through to the outfield for a hit but I wasn't sure so I took off sprinting for first base. Quickly I realized that apparently it had not gone through because I could see the first baseman up ahead setting up to receive a throw from an infielder over on the left side. I gave even more effort to run at flank speed. My foot hit first base well before I heard the ball smack into the first baseman's glove. I had beaten the throw and was safe. Then I heard the umpire call, “he's out.” I gave the umpire my best incredulous shout of “What? You gotta be kidding me!” I turned to him with an expression of unbelief at such an injustice on my face and held my arms out in a familiar gesture that expressed my dismay and incredulity. It was instantly obvious from the ump's facial expression and body language that he was not going to put up with any protest from me, clearly because he knew he had badly missed the call. If I said anything else he was going to send me to the showers. Shaking my head, making sure he could see my disgust, I headed back to the dugout. As I returned to the bench my teammates and my coach were yelling at the umpire in order to inform him of his obvious physical handicap. Being blind is a big handicap for one in such a position. In the dugout my teammates assured me that I was robbed, that I had beaten that throw with no doubt. I was sure I was safe. My coach knew I was safe. My teammates also judged me to be safe. How much did those opinions matter? Zero. There was only one opinion that mattered, and that was the umpire's. If he said I was out, then I was out. End of story.

Paul said, “When it comes to my ministry, my worth, my value, my significance, my faithfulness, there is only one umpire. And you people are not that umpire. I am not that umpire. I judge myself to be faithful, to have a clear conscience. But that doesn't matter. All that matters is what the real umpire thinks. And the real umpire is the Lord, so you can just take your opinions and...” Actually I kind of added that last part. But you get the point. The

world's opinions didn't matter. The opinions of the Corinthian Christians didn't matter. Even Paul's opinion didn't matter. Only the Lord's opinion mattered.

What was the Lord's opinion of Paul? In 1 Timothy 1:12-14 written some 10 years or so after 1 Corinthians Paul said, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." God considered him faithful. God gave him the grace, faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The umpire called Paul "Safe!" and that was all that mattered.

In Acts 18 Luke, one of Paul's associates, recorded an interesting incident that happened in Corinth, home of many of Paul's Christian critics. Paul had faced intense opposition and persecution in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. From there he went to Athens where the philosophers on Mars Hill mocked him and rejected him. He moved on from there to Corinth where the opposition and riots started up again. I think Paul might have been wondering if he needed to just move on because his presence was causing such upheaval. In verses 9-10 Luke says, "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'" The Lord was with him. I would say the one true umpire had made his call. The Corinthians were as wrong as is possible.

Romans 8:39 tells us what Paul understood God to be judging when it came to him. He said "neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul knew that God had given him grace, God had called him, God was with him, God loved him and found him faithful, and that nothing could ever change that. So when it came to the opinions of his critics Paul could say, "Stick it in your ear."

### ***He reveled in his mission***

There is something else that we can see in these verses that enabled Paul to not be crushed by all of the rejection and indifference that he faced in his life. In verse 1 he wrote, "Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed." Paul had been a highly respected Pharisee who was quickly becoming one of the most visible leaders in Israel, a man who was known and respected. When he put his faith in Christ he threw all that away. He cashed in his significance in the eyes of the world. But he got something better, something infinitely more important.

Normally we think of being a servant as being a humble position, one of no power and no great significance. But Paul saw himself as a servant of Christ himself. That's a position that enables him to have a humble view of himself, for he is a servant, but to also have a sense of the vast importance of his role, for he is a servant of the Lord of all that exists, the Supreme Sovereign.

In fact, he had been entrusted with “the mysteries” of God. Paul never got over the fact that he had been given a mission that was the most important in all the universe. He didn’t deserve it, but he had this role to play because of God’s kindness. In Ephesians 3:8 he wrote, “Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.” You see this same idea in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10. “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am.” He was an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Did you know that Jack Bauer is back? The television show *24* that features as its main character top counter terrorism agent Jack Bauer, was recently on the air again after being gone for several years. Jack is the current ultimate tough guy. If Jack had been a Spartan that movie *The 300* would have just been *The 1*. Some people see the glass as half full, some see it as half empty, but Jack Bauer sees the glass as a deadly weapon. On Jack Bauer’s tax return he has to claim the whole world as his dependents.

So Jack is, in the show, a hero. But in this latest season due to actions he took in the past in defense of the country against orders, he is considered by the CIA to be a traitor and they are looking to arrest him. The Russians hate him and want to get revenge on him. He is opposed by terrorists. So lots of people are out to get him, but he is on a mission to stop a devastating terrorist attack. Thousands of lives are at stake. This mission is so important that he must accomplish it no matter what. He doesn’t have time to care about what the CIA thinks or the Russians or anybody else thinks. In the course of the show the President realizes Jack is the only hope so Jack begins to operate under the direct instruction of the President. Some people may not trust him, some people may hate him, people may even try to kill him, but what he’s focused on his role as a servant of the President and on carrying out this life or death mission.

In a way, that’s a little bit like Paul. He was kind of like a first century Jack Bauer, minus the torturing and killing people. He was given a job by the most important, most powerful Being that exists, and the job is the most crucial mission one could have. Millions of eternal lives are at stake. Having a mission like that means one is eternally significant, and it means what other people think doesn’t much matter.

## APPLICATION

### SIGNIFICANCE MATTERS TO ALL OF US

Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, “The basic personal need of each person is to regard himself as a worthwhile human being.” Worthwhile is a big concept. How many times have you said something along the lines of, “Forget it, it’s just not worth it”? We got a message on our voicemail that informed us that we were being offered a free trip to the Bahamas. Now Laurie and I love trips to tropical places. But we’ve been down that “free trip” road before. I am woeful when it comes to financial wisdom, but in my many years of life I have learned one fundamental economic principle. It is an inviolable principle. It is “there is no such thing as a free lunch.” I have come to believe that so much that I feel like that principle should be

renamed “Myatt’s Law.” Free offers like that aren’t really free. There will always be some catch. A corollary of Myatt’s Law is “it’s too good to be true, it’s not true.” In the past I would follow up offers like that right up to the point where I ran into whatever the catch was. Now I don’t even bother. I say, “It’s not worth it.” It’s not a worthwhile activity to follow up on that call. It does not have even enough value to me to justify using a couple of minutes of my life to return the call. We resist with all our might any hint that we might be in that category – not worth it. We desperately want to establish that we have worth, we are significant.

Where did this need for significance come from? In his book *Perilous Pursuits* (p. 13), Joe Stowell wrote that we are “built for significance.” In other words, it’s God’s fault. He put that desire for worth and significance in us. That makes sense. Genesis 1:26 says that we were created in the image of God. Would you say that God is significant? Obviously he is. He is the most significant being of all that exist. All of life derives from him and depends on him. All good comes from him. So Psalm 48:1 says, “Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.” Revelation 4:11 says, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

We know, of course, that we are not God, but we are created in his image. As he is glorious we were created to be glorious. We were created to be worthy of praise and honor. Did you know that you were created to be something glorious, something due great honor? We want that. We want to be glorious. We want to receive praise for it. That’s what we were supposed to be. The problem, of course, is that image of God in us got all fouled up and terribly warped when Adam and Eve fumbled on their own 1 yard line in the Garden of Eden. We aren’t the glorious beings we were supposed to be, and we don’t experience the honor we long for. So we go through life trying to find it.

I’ve been reading *Duty*, a book by Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense under both Presidents Bush and Obama, that tells of his experiences serving in that position during the upheaval and wars of that time. At one point he wrote about a heartbreaking visit he made to the burn ward of the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. This is where the burn victims of combat are taken. Gates’ heart was broken by the suffering of the men in that ward but inspired by their courage and determination. Lots of influential, famous, powerful people go to visit the wounded troops in Bethesda and Walter Reed hospitals outside D. C. No one goes to the burn center in San Antonio. Celebrities don’t drop by there to visit the suffering wounded troops. The men in that ward talked often about how rarely they got official visitors. After Gates visited one decorated army sergeant who was being treated in the ward man said to the press, “I don’t need more medals. I don’t need more money. I just want someone to come and say thanks.” He wanted to know that who he was and what he had done mattered.

While we were in New Orleans we were walking through what they call the Garden District, a neighborhood of beautiful old homes, including one of the first homes in the area, which is called Toby’s Corner. As we walked we came on a cemetery. Cemeteries in New Orleans are

something of a novelty and a tourist attraction because the city is actually below sea level so the water table is really high. Due to this they cannot bury people below ground. So the graveyards have tombs built above ground. We decided to walk through the cemetery. As soon as we entered we encountered a rather unique individual. This extra gregarious individual began telling us all about the graveyard and asking us what we'd like to see. He offered to show us around. The thing is, he wasn't employed there. He wasn't a guide, a caretaker, a docent or anything like that. He was just a guy who hangs out in the graveyard engaging tourists in conversation trying to display his particular knowledge of the place. Laurie calls him Igor. Some of what he said was sort of interesting, but a lot of it was well into TMI territory, and we found ourselves just trying to politely divest ourselves of his company. We finally did manage to extricate ourselves from him, though not without some courteous effort. It was a rather strange encounter, bordering on slightly creepy. Mostly I found it sad. This poor man is clearly an individual desperate both for interaction with others and for some respect, some recognition that he has special knowledge. To me he was the poster child for the human desperate need to be worthwhile, to have his significance acknowledged.

#### THE WORLD'S APPROACH TO SIGNIFICANCE IS DEADLY

What is the world's answer for this dilemma of significance? It is to judge you worthy by what you can do. Your significance comes from being talented, smart, beautiful, capable. Your worth comes from being able to accomplish things, to know things, to do things. Especially it comes from being able to accomplish more, know more, do more than other people. We need to accomplish, know or do more things that other people care about and want.

Suppose you are able to throw a leather football harder, farther and more accurately than anyone else. You are so good at it you can do it while large men with mayhem in mind are trying to get at you and hit you so hard your teeth will rattle. You combine that with an ability to find teammates to throw the ball to while people are trying to prevent them from catching the ball. Will you be valued in our culture? You'd better believe it. People will admire you, flatter you, give you lots of fame and pay you ridiculous sums of money. You will be considered hugely significant.

Now let's suppose that you have all those same skills and you live in Egypt. Will anyone care? No, your skills will be pretty much useless. They will impress no one and if that's all you can do you will be seen as worthless. So the world's way of producing a sense of significance requires that we have some talent, skill, ability, knowledge, it needs to be something that other people around us desire or respect, and we need to be able to do it better than other people.

Parents in our culture are hypersensitive to their children's sense of self-esteem. That's really about their children's sense of significance. What is the usual approach to helping them have solid self-esteem? It is to help them find something they can do that they are successful at - succeed in school, develop some artistic or musical skill, especially find some athletic endeavor at which they excel. What is the thinking behind that approach? Your significance,

your worth, comes from what you do. So find something impressive you do better than others. That is exactly how the world tells us to establish a sense of our significance.

Why is this approach deadly? For several reasons. First, it involves comparison. That means it is a competition. The better you are at the skill, the more valuable you are. In other words, the more people that are not as good as you and the less who are as good as you, the greater your value and significance. It doesn't help my sense of significance if my skill is, say, playing the bass guitar and I can sort of do it but there are throngs of people better me. All my skill does then is remind me I'm not very valuable.

Dr. Carlo Strenger of Tel Aviv University has done a 10-year-long study of feelings of insignificance. He published a book titled *The Fear of Insignificance: Searching For Meaning In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In the book he says social media has made comparing ourselves with others pervasive. It "has turned rating and ranking of individuals based on scales of celebrity and wealth into a mania and obsession."

Another problem with competition is there will be winners and losers. You could well be one of the losers. You may end up like Igor, the guy in the cemetery who isn't good looking, isn't talented, isn't smarter than other people and who is desperately seeking something that will show everybody how valuable he is. I can assure you from personal experience in my athletic endeavors, being a loser stinks.

Unfortunately in this competition there will always be more losers than winners. Consider sports. Who won the Super Bowl this year? It was the Seattle Seahawks. It was a gratifying, rewarding thing for them. They were a big deal. I keep seeing Russell Wilson on television commercials. Who didn't win the Super Bowl this year? Arizona, Atlanta, Baltimore, Buffalo, Carolina, Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Green Bay, Houston, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Miami, Minnesota, New England, New Orleans, New York Giants, New York Jets, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, San Diego, San Francisco, Tampa Bay, Tennessee and Washington. Does that suggest anything to you? Many more will suffer in this competition in life than will benefit from it.

That competitive aspect of the pursuit of significance the world's way has another downside. It means you will never be safe. Your significance will always be at risk. You can never rest. What if somehow you should lose that ability? Suppose your significance is in your singing ability, and you lose your voice. Or suppose you are like the woman who thinks she's valuable because she is gorgeous, but then she gets old. It may not even be that you lose the ability. You will always be threatened by the fact that someone may come along who is much better at your ability than you. Suddenly you don't matter as much anymore. This approach makes us defensive, fearful of losing our position, touchy if anyone ever dare question our significance, and so easily threatened.

Another problem with this approach is that it makes us slaves to the opinions of others. We are trying to derive our significance by what they think. That's a guaranteed miserable existence, because first people are preoccupied with themselves and not with you, and second because they are fickle. They change their minds a lot.

The biggest problem of all with the world's approach is that it creates winners and losers but in the end the winners will discover they also are losers. They think they will find significance in their ability, but they will discover even if they are the best in the world, it will not be enough. It will feel hollow to them, because they want more significance than the opinions of people can ever give them.

What happens to the winners? So often they become full of themselves, entitled demanding and superior in their attitudes. They become famous and find their fame is a curse and they try to hide from people. Yet they are addicted to the fame. Worse they discover it is not enough. They find there is something more. There is a higher court. That court is the Lord. Do you think God will say, "You're Tom Hanks? Wow, can I have your autograph?"

#### WE MUST REST IN REAL SIGNIFICANCE

We feel insignificant because we pretty much are, no matter what we do. I'm one of 7 billion dots living on an invisible dot in the universe and nothing I do will alter that. The billions of people around me know nothing of me and care nothing about me. I have negligible impact on human events if any at all. The world has offered me rejection at times, but mostly takes no notice at all and most of my life is consumed with mundane, small actions. Dr. Strenger of Tel Aviv University who has studied insignificance says the answer is we need to just accept ourselves. Yeah, thanks. That's a lot easier said than done. Why is that so hard?

There is a combination of forces that drives us continually back to the world's way. One is, of course, ***the world around us***. It is utterly obsessed with this competition for significance and it constantly is shoving it in our face. You cannot get away from it even for a single day. It is everywhere in the world. But what makes it really frustrating is that ***our own hearts*** continually default to that worldly approach. Without thinking about it, unbidden our minds and hearts just naturally go down that road. We want people to notice us, to approve of us, to applaud us. To do anything else is unnatural. Or perhaps we should say supernatural.

Paul knew that we need value in the eyes of someone even bigger than the human race. That someone is God himself. Value is determined by what someone will pay. God has paid infinitely to have you and me as his children. Our significance is found in his love for us. Because Paul rested in that he could be viewed as pond scum by the world, even by people in the church, and say, "I could care less."

Significance is found in the fact that we have been given a Jack Bauer like mission. Like Paul we have a mission in which lives are at stake. Our mission is to be a beacon of the grace and

knowledge of God to every moment of our lives. We don't have to convince anyone of anything, we just have to let people see and know God's grace in Jesus Christ.

You may think the little you do doesn't count for much. I know the feeling. Oh yeah your church is really making a big impact...not. You may have critics that affirm you are indeed pond scum. That doesn't matter. What matters is the one umpire who counts loves you and considers you valuable. He has given you an eternally important mission. You can't make it powerful nor can you truly evaluate it. That's not your job. Your job is to be faithful.

But I don't see any big effect of my life. That's all right. Consider that Paul never knew how massive his impact would be. He didn't know how his letters would be impacting you and me two millenia after he was gone. At the end of his life Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:16 as he was on trial for his life that "everyone deserted me." He could have felt like a failure. That could have been crushing. He could have felt like he mattered to no one. But in that same chapter in verse 8 he said, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge," which is to say the only Umpire that matters, "will award to me on that day." The one who mattered would say, "Good job, Paul," and that was the only thing that mattered to him.

Laurie and I recently watched the movie *The Secret Life Of Walter Mitty*. Spoiler alert: I'm going to give away the ending. The movie is a loose adaptation of James Thurber's classic short story of the same name. Walter Mitty, the central character in the movie, works for *Life* magazine. He is responsible for the negatives that the photographers send that will become the pictures in the magazine. He is an utterly nondescript man who frequently mentally wanders off into daydreams of accomplishing great and noble feats, of being heroic, being significant. His life is the total contrast with his dreams. A most famous photographer has sent the cover photo for the last issue of the magazine, but the negative is missing. This photo is, according to the photographer, his best ever, his most important, for it catches the essence of life. So Mitty launches out to track down the photographer and find the negative. He goes on an impossible series of adventures of the kind he dreams about to find the guy. He succeeds only to learn the negative was back home all the time. In the end the photo is found and Walter sees it for the first time when he sees the magazine on a newsstand. It is a photograph of him examining a sheet of negatives. The essence of life all along was Walter Mitty, faithfully doing a job that no one saw but that was essential.