

## Skubala

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### Phil 3:8

(NA 27<sup>th</sup> ed.)

ἀλλὰ μενοῦνγε καὶ  
ἡγοῦμαι πάντα ζημίαν εἶναι  
διὰ τὸ ὑπερέχον τῆς γνώσεως  
Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου,  
δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα ἐζημιώθην,  
καὶ ἡγοῦμαι **σκύβαλα**,  
ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω

(NIV)

What is more,  
I consider everything a loss  
because of the surpassing worth of knowing  
Christ Jesus my Lord,  
for whose sake I have lost all things.  
I consider them **garbage**,  
that I may gain Christ

Line 1 has three conjunctions connoting something like, “But rather also.” The last word of line 2 is of course “to be.” *Zēmia* is “harm,” as in zemology, the study of social ills. See its verbal form too in line 5, also following *panta*, “all.” Line 3’s “surpassing worth” is from “hyper” + “to have” = “to excel.” And of course look for the characteristic gnō for “knowing,” as in English “knowing” and “gnomic.” But by far the most colorful word in the verse is line 6’s *skubala*, “garbage.” In English, a “scybalum” is a hard mass of fecal matter in the bowel. Yuck.

Yuck is exactly the sense, actually. Probably you know that KJV glosses *skubala*, “dung.” The term is a bit more general but includes excrement from animals and humans. Shoot, however you handle it, this is what Paul thinks of his old self-confidences. Everything that he used to think commended him to God, all of his religiosity, he now thinks of as deficit. Rather than working his way *toward* God, he was working his way *from* God. He had been proud to be a Pharisee, of Hebrew pedigree, blameless according to the law as interpreted by his culture. But all of the things that he trusted for his right standing before God, are now just so much crap.

Jesus actually said it stronger. He said that unless you “hate,” you cannot be his disciple (Luke 14:26). Of course, he calls you to love your enemies. Unlike those closest to you, enemies hardly can persuade you to turn from the straight and narrow. But those you love, and especially your own soul with its agenda and inclinations, you must “hate” in the sense of refuse their rule (Luke 16:13, 19:14) and not allow them to influence you in a bad way. Hate—abominate—whatever competes with him in your heart. Those dear things became Paul’s *skubala*.

Paul repented of his own righteousness. What gives you a sense of acceptability apart from Jesus? What makes you feel secure? What do you wrongly think you need for abundant life? From these you must repent.

I know a man who started seminary and wanted to get into a Greek study group. They met without him and one day he went home to an empty house and cried. Then he asked himself, “Where have I lost my identity?” Once he realized that this group was functioning in his heart as a substitute for a relationship with Christ, it lost its power over him. For the rest of his seminary career he could cultivate friendships without that neediness.

Perhaps you think you need your job to be happy. I know plenty of men who suddenly lost their jobs. One in particular is now an EPC pastor. These men and their families learned day by day that God provides, and they live and breathe and have their being not with the job—but with their true Provider.

Similarly, I know a woman whose husband in his mid-40s started coughing blood and in 3 months was dead. She had never worked and he was the sole bread winner—but left no life insurance provision. Yet she painfully learned that she didn’t actually need a spouse to live. God became her

“husband” who took care of her through her excruciating struggles and dark times.

The most extreme example of this in my experience was an old Presbyterian dying of stomach cancer. As he declined, he asked his pastor, “Tell me about the mansions.” They finally removed his stomach, and I remember him saying, “I don’t know how a man can live without a stomach”—then he heedlessly praised God and worshipped anyway. Another man said of fibro myalgia, “This too shall pass,” meaning it will be over after his death when he enters glory.

These people learned to repent of what they thought they needed to be satisfied, to be secure, to live the good life. Paul had his world turned upside down in order to see that his own righteousness was *skubala*. The surpassing worth of knowing the true God is painful to learn because we must first stop leaning on substitutes.

But someday Jesus will return and there will be no need for these painful lessons anymore. Boy, do we look forward to that Day!