

In my grandmother's kitchen, on the doorframe that leads into her pantry filled with our favorite cereals and canned goods older than my father, there are pencil marks. Some of them are faint, and some have been smudged by grubby little hands or faded by teenagers leaning against the wall. The marks start low on the doorframe and reach up to just below the head of the doorway. Scratchy lines with names and dates, used over decades to track the growth of all the grandchildren. The oldest line is barely legible, but we know it was the late 80s when it was written, and the newest line was marked just this year. Over the years those height markers were a game, a competition, a way for the oldest cousins to tease one another as one brother surpassed another. As we grew, the lines got closer together and eventually stopped as we reached full stature. Now at Christmastime new marks are added for the great-grands, the babies whose fathers' names were the first to be written in the doorway. As a child, that is how you're measured, by size and by age and by how many words you can form and by how long you sleep through the night. As you grow, the distance between the soles of your feet and the crown of your head becomes more and more significant, a marker of age and growth and development.

At some point, that distance stops expanding, and you begin to be measured by other things. Your grades in school, your position on the team, the number of service hours you do or the number of badges you've earned. Eventually it's what college you did or didn't attend, how much your scholarship is worth and how much debt you're in. You're measured by what you get paid, how happily you're married, how successful your children are and how often they call home. What is your credit score, your BMI? How healthy is your investment portfolio, how prepared are you for retirement, how many vacations do you take and how far do you go from home? Whether it's a mark on a wall or a comma in a bank account, we are being measured daily. Every moment of every day we are comparing ourselves and one another to any number of

impossibly high measures. We are standing with our backs to a wall, straining and striving, sometimes quite literally praying that we have reached a new height.

Paul knows this pattern well. It is clear from his own writings that Paul spent his entire life striving to measure up, first to the Torah and then to the needs and demands of the Gospel and those to whom he brought it. Paul shares with us his resume, the list of qualifications and accomplishments that define him as a blameless, righteous, zealous man of God. Even before his conversion, Saul had every right to be secure in how he measured up to the expectations and duties of the culture he was born into. By every measure that Paul could come up with, his mark was high on the wall.

For Paul, the wall lovingly marked with heights and names and dates by a proud grandmother is the Torah. A measure of righteous behavior handed down to him by his own family, by his people, by the culture born out of deliverance and wandering and exile and covenant. For him, as for Jesus, to be a Torah observant Jew was to be the best version of himself and of all who came before him. To ask others to measure up to the same, as Paul's opponents would have him ask Gentile converts to Christ, would be disingenuous. To the non-Jewish Christians in Philippi, Paul says that to attempt to measure up is not the point. In a moment of pastoral love for those whose faith is challenged by constant comparison, Paul steps back from the wall, and calls for a different measure.

Paul says that even he, in whom the highest expectations of his world are met, has nothing if he does not have Christ. He speaks not out of pride but out of immense vulnerability and humility. He has come to know that nothing he can do, no degree of labor or charity or law-abiding care can define him. The titles that he has earned, a son of Israel, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Pharisee who knows the law by heart; these mean nothing if he does not also know

Jesus. His entire life's work will be meaningless if, at his death, he does not die in the faith and love of Christ. Like a child straining on tiptoe to gain the coveted inch, Paul admits that he still presses on to what lies ahead, toward the heavenly call of God. He tells us that he cannot accomplish that goal on his own, and that neither can we.

We do not find our worth in the measures of our character, our performance, our productivity or the way others perceive us. We do not even find our value in how kind we are, or how much we volunteer, or what amount we donate, or even how we vote. The Christian life is one framed by loving service, and charity, and all the fruits of the Spirit, yes. The marks of a disciple are what signals to the world that approaching the Light of the Gospel is a worthwhile endeavor, of course. We commemorate our saints for the ways that they lived lives of extraordinary witness, and we pray that we might grow up to be more like them. The way we live matters, and the lives we touch are important. But no measure, no rule of life or code of ethics or resume or accomplishment can mean anything to us if we don't also know Jesus. When niceness and striving and the performances of religion and duty push grace out of the picture, all we have is loss. When we ask for peace without looking for Jesus in the discord, when we silence suffering because hating evil is unpleasant, when we are more proud of our memberships than of our discipleship, we have lost sight of the true measure of salvation.

Whatever gains we have are nothing in comparison with the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul urges us to turn away from the measuring wall and toward the cross, and he lifts up to us his own example. Paul has flung himself heart-first into the joy of knowing Christ, and desperately prays to know Christ better. Paul has left behind the world in which he was deemed worthy by what he could accomplish in favor of a kingdom in which his worth is granted by the Grace of a God who reached down into the grave and pulled him out. Let this be

the moment you do the same. Who you are in Christ matters. What you do because of Christ matters. Everything else is rubbish.