

## INTRODUCTION

I have two questions for you this morning.

1. **What are you after?** By that I mean: "What is driving you right now? What are you working toward? striving for? setting your agenda for? organizing your life around? in full pursuit of?"

Your answer may well depend as much on your present circumstances as on your personal aspirations.

Your present goal may be as basic as finishing school, or getting that raise, or that job. Your goal may be as simple as getting well, or getting along, or getting out.

Perhaps your present goal is a bit ambitious: to climb the corporate ladder, or to start your own company, or to retire with plenty of money in the bank.

2. My second question is: **How's that working out for you?** Are you making any progress? Are you closing in on your goal?

Maybe age and experience have altered your goals. You flamed out, and you got old: what once seemed entirely attainable now lies, you admit, beyond your reach. Or, perhaps, your life's circumstances were suddenly changed: what mattered then is no longer relevant. New goals have resulted, and more immediate pursuits came into play.

Or maybe you just wised up: what once seemed so important now seems foolish.

3. That's what happened to Saul of Tarsus. His circumstances, personal ambitions, and his perspective on everyone and everything he knew were abruptly and permanently altered on the Damascus Road (**Acts 9**). Everything had changed since that astonishing incident. He would regard things differently from that moment on, and his life would travel a different, more difficult path. Accordingly, and almost immediately, he set a new goal:
  - one which would not be altered by the many changes he would experience in his Christian life;
  - one which would not be diminished, but, instead, intensified in his toil and weariness;

- one which he would pursue passionately until his dying day.

Before we read his testimony, let us pray.

### LESSON: *Philippians 3:7-16*

1. Ah – the first word in v.7 is “*But...*”, which indicates a connection to Paul’s previous thoughts. We’d best go back to v.2 and begin today’s lesson there.
  - a. In v.2 he makes reference to what appears to have been a persistent irritant in his ministry: a cadre of intruders who found their way into local churches which Paul had established, but only after he had moved on to his next church-planting endeavor. The church at Philippi was neither the first nor the last place to which they would follow him.
  - b. Often collectively referred to as “Judaizers” by Bible scholars, these men took it upon themselves to qualify Paul’s teaching by adding (to his mind) “*the righteousness of the (Mosaic) law*” to the *righteousness of faith* – salvation, as a free gift of God’s grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.
    - (1) These well-meaning men did NOT disagree with Paul concerning the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. By all accounts, they acknowledged Jesus to have been the promised Messiah of God and agreed that His atoning sacrifice – as the perfect *Lamb of God* – on the cross was the critical component of God’s plan of salvation for all His people – Jew and Gentile alike.
    - (2) Where they did take issue with the Apostle was in his disallowing the Law of Moses any contribution to the salvation process. Surely, they reasoned, *Jahweh* did not intend that the coming of Messiah would supersede the teachings He had personally dictated to Moses on Mount Sinai, the teachings that for thousands of years His chosen people had been consistently exhorted by His prophets to obey. Surely the intricate instructions contained in ***Genesis, Leviticus*** and ***Deuteronomy*** – the lessons that for generations had been taught in their homes and synagogues, the bloody sacrifices that for centuries had been offered in the Temple – must remain an important part of the path to the righteousness of God!
    - (3) The broader concerns of the Judaizers had been distilled by them into one particular element of God’s covenant with Israel: **circumcision**. And they could use sacred Scripture itself to make their case. Let us read ***Genesis 17:1-15***.
  - c. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, written six or seven years earlier, Paul had gone to great lengths to articulate the concept of salvation *sola gratia, sola fide* – God’s justification of the sinner “by grace alone through faith alone” (***Romans 3:21-28***).

- d. He more recently had condensed this doctrine into what we know as **Ephesians 2:8-10**:

*For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should do.* NKJV

- e. Now, as he hears that the Judaizers (again!) have wormed their way into the church at Philippi, we can almost hear his voice raising and see his nostrils flaring as he dictates the words of **3:2**:

*“Watch out for those dogs, those wicked men and their evil deeds, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved!”* NLT

- f. Oh, Paul was riled! He got that way whenever anyone tried to add anything to the all-sufficient grace of God for righteousness. This was because he, perhaps more than any man alive, knew the inadequacy of any human attempt to gain righteous status before the face of the Holy One of Israel, the futility of putting “*confidence in the flesh*” to gain salvation (v.3). In order to drive his point home, in v.4-6 Paul presents his own impeccable Judaic “credentials”. If anyone could have “earned” righteous status before the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it would have been he!

2. So we come to our text passage: **Philippians 3:7-11**.

- a. In v.7 Paul shakes his head and snaps back to the present.

*“I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless, because of what Christ has done.”* NLT

- b. Perhaps that “worthless” in v.7 was not deemed a sufficiently strong dismissal to the old Apostle. In v.8 he uses an economic analogy to intensify his meaning. Not only were those things he once valued of no profit to him, he explains, they had in reality been of negative value – a liability – in his life-long goal to please God.

- c. Paul was not beyond using blunt, perhaps even offensive, language in order to convey the strength of his convictions.

(1) The Greek noun translated as “mutilators” (NIV, ESV) in v.2 has no exact English counterpart. Paul employs it, scholars surmise, as a pointed pun, casting those who would insist on circumcision for Gentile proselytes as “castrators”.

(2) The noun politely rendered as “rubbish” in v.8 (NIV, ESV) is most accurately translated in the venerable old KJV: “dung”. Its precise meaning is “animal excrement”. It doesn’t take much of an imagination to guess what colourful term Paul might have employed, had he lived in the present century!

d. In rejecting as “rubbish” the highly-valued emblems of achievement and status of his old life when compared to “the surpassing greatness” of his present circumstances – under house arrest in Rome, awaiting a trial that could (and perhaps did) result in his execution, remember – Paul assigns priceless worth to what he now regards as his most treasured possession: “knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord”.

(1) For Paul, the surest evidence that he was now “in Christ” – that he was, in fact, “a new creation in Christ” (**2 Corinthians 5:17**); that he was being “transformed by the renewing of [his] mind” (**Romans 12:2**) – was the total reversal of his value system.

(2) What had taken control of Paul’s new life which made the values and aspirations of his old life so very disposable? An entirely new goal:

*...that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness which is from God by faith (v.8b-9 NKJV).*

e. Paul’s thirst for righteousness was not a new pursuit in his life. As a Pharisee, he had dedicated his life to righteousness which, in those days, he had believed could be *earned* by means of strict adherence to every jot and tittle of the Mosaic law. Here we must give the Pharisees their religious due: they were devout and entirely committed to piety. Had not our Lord Himself once declared:

*“...unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20 NKJV)?*

Paul now knew what Jesus had meant on that occasion: the only righteousness which could, in fact, exceed the practiced righteousness of the Pharisees was (and is) “*the righteousness which is from God....through faith in Christ.*”

f. The driving passion in his life is now, he continues:

*...that I may know [Christ] and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death... (v.10 NKJV)*

a. Paul is explaining why he rejects all other efforts to attain righteousness. Since they could, in the end, only fail, he reasoned, they would actually prevent his realizing his personal goal of righteousness: to know Christ.

b. Theologian John Walvoord reminds us\* that Paul, accomplished Greek linguist that he was, had at his disposal any number of verbs – all of which would be translated into English as “to know” – by which to convey his intense desire to know Christ.

(1) *oida* - “to comprehend mentally”; “to understand intellectually”  
(1 *Thessalonians* 1:4)

(2) *epistomai* - “to know by acquaintance, familiarity, or contact”  
(*Acts* 10:28)

(3) *sunemi* - “deep insight based on careful and logical analysis of the facts”  
(*Ephesians* 5:17)

\*John F. Walvoord: *Triumph in Christ*

c. Instead of any of these, he chooses in *Philippians* 3:10 to use the Greek verb *ginosko*, which means “to know experientially”.

“It is the personal experience of another person. We may see the depth of this word *to know* from a fact of Old Testament usage. The Old Testament uses the verb *to know* of sexual intercourse: *Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bare Cain* (*Genesis* 4:1). The Hebrew verb which most closely corresponds to the Greek *ginoskein* indicates the closest and most intimate and the most personal knowledge of another person. So then, it is not Paul’s aim *to know about Christ*. It is Paul’s aim *to know Christ*. The knowledge in question is not knowledge of any fact or any theory or any theology; it is knowledge of a person.”

- William Barclay: *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*

(1) Paul desired the fullest possible knowledge of Christ’s **person**. The best way to get to know – to *really* know – someone is to spend “quality” time with him or her. I will begin to know Jesus Christ more thoroughly by committing to time spent:

- studying the life and teachings of Christ contained in Scripture, alone and in the company of other believers,
- on my knees in prayer, and
- “abiding” in Him; that is, *losing my life in His*, surrendering my stubborn will to His lordship (*Galatians* 2:20).

(2) Paul desired the fullest possible knowledge of Christ’s **power**. In this sense his choice of the verb *ginosko* is entirely appropriate. We cannot “know” more fully the power of Christ – the Holy Spirit – unless we experience it in our lives. This is possible only when we are striving in the work of Christ, divine endeavors which require that power. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

*We proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. **To this end I labour, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works within me.***  
- Colossians 1:28-29 NIV

“Some people never learn of Christ’s faithfulness because they never put themselves in a position where they are dependent solely on His faithfulness. They never experience the might of His power because their lives are run on the basis of their own ability to do whatever needs doing. They don’t need much evidence of the supernatural because they live exclusively in the arena of the natural.”  
- Stuart Briscoe: *Bound for Joy*

(3) Paul desired the fullest possible knowledge of Christ’s **passion**. Like it or not, to know Christ experientially will include some degree of suffering. For some Christians in other parts of the world, a “better knowledge” of Christ’s passion has included the sacrifice of life itself. For us, blessed to live in a country where freedom of religion is a core democratic value, that sacrifice will more often require the surrender of whatever in our personal lives binds us up in spiritual apathy and impotence or leads us into outright disobedience – our “felt needs”, or our personal rights, or the invasion of our precious time – in order to obey the call of our Lord to “take up our cross” and to follow Him as His disciples.

For us, a better knowledge of Christ’s passion will most likely manifest itself in the *inconvenient* ministry of compassion – responding to the needs of others in Christian service – and in the *humiliating* ministry of forgiveness – bearing the full cost of the injuries of slight, slander and injustice in order to restore a relationship. Nothing is more lacking in the lives of most believers; nothing is more sorely needed in the local church.

3. In v. 14 Paul identifies the motive behind his desire to better know Christ and explains the manner in which he will pursue that desire.

a. Paul’s motive is “*the prize*”:

(1) *...that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me....* (NIV)

(2) *...the upward call of God in Christ Jesus...* (NASB)

(3) *...that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus...* (KJV)

(4) *...that for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven...* (NLT)

## LESSONS

1. So what is The Prize? Salvation itself? Eternal life in heaven? I don't think so. These have already been awarded to those whose righteousness is *the righteousness of God* through *faith in Christ Jesus*.

So what is it?

The believer's "prize", Beloved, is *the upward call* – the next level of the *abundant life* to which Christ has called you, here and now. It is that so often under-valued portion of your spiritual inheritance which God desires that we embrace and enjoy in the days of our lives. Hurrah!

- a. {Jesus said:} *"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it **more abundantly**."*  
- **John 10:10b** NKJV
- b. "One design you are to pursue to the end of time – the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this – love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever you desire or fear, whatever you seek or shun, whatever you think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being."  
- John Wesley: *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*
- c. **Q:** 1. What is the chief and highest end of man?

**A:** Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, *and fully to enjoy Him forever*.

- First question of The Larger Catechism, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*

2. Concluding his thoughts on this subject, Paul injects an honest and important personal note In vs. 12-14: *he has not yet achieved his spiritual goals for his earthly life*.
  - a. "This is the statement of a great Christian who never permitted himself to be satisfied with his spiritual attainments. Obviously, Paul was satisfied with Jesus Christ (v.10), but he was not satisfied with his Christian life. A sanctified dissatisfaction is the first essential to progress in the Christian race."  
- Warren W. Wiersbe: *Be Joyful*
  - b. "All that believers are now in Christ and will enjoy forever in heaven is eternally fixed by God's gracious purpose (*cf. 1 Peter 1:4*). That spiritual reality and promise cannot be improved upon, but believers' virtue in this present life can and must be. Knowing that we are not now what we should be, and what we someday will be in glory, must not produce apathy and indolence, but a zeal for moving in the direction of the prize. That is the Spirit's work (**2 Corinthians 3:18**) and the longing of the regenerated soul. The awareness of the need to improve one's spiritual condition is a necessary prerequisite to pursuing the prize of spiritual perfection."  
- John MacArthur: *Philippians* (*The John MacArthur New Testament Commentary series*)

3. Paul's *modus operandi* for his pursuit of The Prize is set forth in vs.13-14:
  - a. an honest and accurate spiritual self-analysis, which will always leave the growing Christian dissatisfied and eager to keep moving on;
  - b. forgetting the past – the confident refusal to be neither hamstrung by past failure nor satisfied with past success;
  - c. focused and disciplined spiritual growth – taking every opportunity to better know Christ's *person*, to more fully experience Christ's *power*, to more readily be the bearer of Christ's *passion*.
  
4. In v.15 Paul asserts that, as the believer matures spiritually, God, through the Holy Spirit, will enable him or her to more clearly see, more fully understand, and more fervently desire The Prize – the abundant, by-faith Christian life, filled to the top and running over with tests, challenges, opportunities and blessings: *life to the full*, hopeful and teeming with purpose, until the last moment of your earthly life.
  
5. So, he concludes in v.16, we should continue to grow in truth and grace, and *to live up to what we have already attained*.
  - a. “Here Paul has in mind a thought-out and maintained lifestyle, based on and displaying the truth of Christ as the individual (so far) knows it. In other words, putting the matter in our own context, the individual believer is free to work out a rule of thought and behavior in the light of the Word of God. This is the way of Christian progress, **for we will constantly develop in both our beliefs and our conduct as God allows more and yet more light to break forth out of His Word.**” (emphasis mine)
 

- J.A. Motyer: *The Message of Philippians*
  - b. “We may state this truth in another way, which applies to each of us, no matter where we are on our journey. *Fidelity to truth already attained in a condition of receiving fuller and fuller truth.* None of us are bereft of truth, all are at some level of maturity – let us be true to that.”
 

- Maxie D. Dunnam: *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Phileman* (The Communicator's Commentary series)

*Amen, Soli Deo Gloria.*