

I Want To Know Christ

If you want to finish a race, you need to remember what your goal is. That's why this picture of a race in this morning's text is such a perfect illustration for life. And when you understand who wrote it, you begin to see why. Paul says in this morning's text, ***I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*** Life's goal, according to Paul, was heaven. But if you're human, sometimes your goal, and all the steps you have to take to get there, can get confused.

That's what happened to Paul. See, Paul was at one point an accomplished, scholarly, and highly esteemed Pharisee. So Paul's focus wasn't so much on the finish line, as it was on the individual steps he was taking to get himself there.

He knew he wanted to be right with God. And he knew the steps God demanded. He knew that God said that it was good to go to church, good to live a moral life, good to be a respectful son and a good student. It was good to care about the truth. So he did. And he spent his life so focused on those footsteps – on doing those things – that he never understood his goal.

In the first couple of verses here, Paul is basically giving his spiritual resume. And his resume can be broken up into two categories: things about Paul's life he had nothing to do with, and things he did. He was born a Hebrew of Hebrews and he was circumcised. Obviously he had no control over either of those things, and yet at one time, these were things of pride for Paul. But as he grew up, he did have control over how well he kept the law, how zealous he was, and how strongly he pushed others to live righteously like him. And these are all things that, even today, people recognize as being good. In fact sometimes it's these things which get confused with what it means to be a Christian.

Friends, it is very possible to be faithful to your marriage, to love your children, help the needy, really care about doing what's right and stay away from what's wrong, to spend every weekend in church, do as much work as you can for your church, and still not get what a Christian life is. If all you think about are those daily steps, the things you're doing that maybe others aren't, you're not seeing the goal.

When that happened to Paul, his life wasn't filled with joy in what God had done; instead he was angry with others. And he spent every waking moment thinking about what he had to do.

500 years ago, Martin Luther fell into the same thing. Early in his life, Luther strived to please God. To do everything he could to gain God's favor. He chose to be a monk, he chose a life of asceticism, he even beat himself for his sins, he tried everything to appease his God. Looking back on this Luther said, *"I can't stand a bad conscience at all; the devil hounds me about a single sin until the world becomes too small for me, and afterward I feel like spitting on myself for having been afraid of such a small thing."*

Luther and Paul were as righteous as humanly possible. But early in their lives, neither knew what it meant to be a Christian. Because neither could make it to their goal no matter how many good steps they took. And that's an important point we want to take away from today's text.

Did you notice in verse 4-7 Paul wasn't necessarily talking about sinful things. He wasn't saying, I'm done focusing on hatred or lust or lying. He was talking about the good things. Always being in church. Working hard to do what's right. Looking to help those in need. Following the Law. But he says of all those things, ***I consider them loss, for the sake of Christ....I consider them garbage.***"

Did you know that the greek word for “loss” really means “damage.” In other words, if someone uses these two categories which Paul describes (your social status and works) to determine their value, then they are actually doing damage to their relationship with Christ. As Luther says, “*Sin doesn’t harm us as much as our own righteousness.*” And so the truth Paul wants us to recognize today Christians is this: we not only need to repent of our sins, but we also need to repent of our own righteousness as well!

To put this into perspective: I want you to imagine for a moment that you are exactly the race and ethnicity and gender that gives you the greatest advantage in this world. Imagine you thoroughly enjoy your job and are really good at it. Imagine everyone tells you regularly how much they love and appreciate you and how good of a job you’re doing. What is the most you could ever gain if that were the case?

For Paul, who actually did have every advantage and felt really good about what he did every day, the most he could ever gain was hell. Paul’s list describes his life before he became a Christian. And one day, before he was a Christian, he was walking on the road to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light and told him that all the advantages he had gained on earth didn’t gain him any advantage with God. God made Paul blind that day to put him in his place. And it was in being blind to everything he had gained in this world that Paul was able to clearly see the one thing his profitable and privileged life had been missing.

See, until he was blind, Paul had never seen the type of man standing in front of him. A man who could have profited in this world so much more than Paul ever did; someone who could have had all the wealth and fame this world could ever give; someone who could have been adored by everyone if he just would have done more miracles or overcome the Romans and put on a crown like the people wanted him to. But a man who considered all of that worth far less than you and me and Paul; and getting us into heaven by enduring the pain of a crucifixion so our self-centered sins could be forgiven and we could one day attain what Paul calls “the resurrection from the dead,” or, in other words, far more than you or I could ever gain for ourselves no matter what category of life we fit in.

And all that’s ours, Paul says in verse 9, ***through faith it in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.***

I think Baptism is a perfect illustration of what Paul’s talking about today. What did we do to earn that righteousness that’s ours by faith? Absolutely nothing. We were born into this world dead in our sin. But God did something at our baptism didn’t he? Through water and the Word, God gave us Jesus’ righteousness. Clothed us head to toe with Jesus’ perfect life and his innocent death.

All that is yours, simply through faith. Some of you have known that truth far longer than I have. Paul knew it, too.

So did it strike you as odd to read how Paul explained that truth? He says, “***I want to know Christ.***” “Um, Paul? You know him. You saw him face to face. You travel the world telling people about him. You know Jesus.” Paul didn’t just want to know about Jesus – he wanted to know him when it mattered most.

When the race seemed long, when God’s apostle was tired, and weak, and worn, he wanted “***to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.***”

And so it is for you Christians. When the race seems long, when you are tired and you don't want to suffer. Pray with Paul, ***“Father, I want to know Christ and share in his sufferings. Help me understand what it means that Jesus chose to suffer for my sins, remind me that I'm not alone.”***

When the race seems too scary, and you have to face death. Pray with Paul, ***“I want to know Christ and become like him in his death. Father, teach me to die like Jesus.***

And after that, ***I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection!”***

“Knowing Christ” to Paul, changed how he lived, viewed himself, his accomplishments, his life. From then on, everything else was useless, in comparison.

As Luther says, ***“No man can be thoroughly humbled until he knows that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, devices, endeavors, will and works, and depends entirely on the choice, will, and work of another, namely, Christ alone.”*** Another humbling, and yet necessary truth which was emphasized 500 years ago, and still stands today.

“I want to know Christ.” That is our goal. In a few minutes we'll sing, *Take the World, but Give Me Jesus.* It was written by a woman named Fanny Crosby. A couple months ago I brought her up in a sermon. Maybe you remember she was blind from birth. Yet listen to how she described her life: *“It seemed intended by God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the privilege. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me...When I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior.”* What a beautiful sight that will be, Lord when your glory I shall see. And isn't that the goal, isn't that the prize? May we always say with Paul, ***“I consider everything else loss....I want to know Christ.”*** Amen.

