

Philippians 3:7-14 The Prize Is Waiting! Lent 5/Examination Sunday March 13, 2016

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our only Savior. Amen.

The Word of God that tells us of the great importance of Christ for our lives is written in Philippians 3:7-14 These are Your Words heavenly Father. Make us holy through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen

Dear Christians, Redeemed by Christ,

We learn much about Paul's early life in his letter to the Philippians. Paul had lived as an ideal Jew. He had been taught by a famous Jewish scholar. He came from a Jewish family line of Pharisees, the most religious of the Jews. He followed the ceremonial laws exactly. Everyone in Jerusalem looked up to Paul. When a persecution against Christian Jews began, Paul took the lead against them. He was even chosen to lead a religious war against Christian Jews in Damascus.

But, Jesus stopped him on the road, appearing in shining glory and it knocked Paul to the ground and blinded him. But, Christ's Words opened Paul's heart to the truth. All that had been important to him became worthless. He saw the true worth of having Christ as the Savior for eternal life. And from then on he encouraged other Christians, saying:

The Prize Is Waiting!

First, there is only one way to get the prize. As a missionary, Paul had taught the Christians in Philippi that Jesus was the only person who could save them. Later, false teachers mixed the Gospel of Christ with all kinds of Jewish laws. They taught the people that trusting Christ to save them was not enough. To be certain of salvation, they needed laws as much as they needed Christ. When Paul heard about that, he was concerned the people would turn from being saved by God's grace through faith in Christ to a salvation by works. It would be like selling their valued possessions to buy worthless stock. No matter how much they had it had no lasting value.

He wrote in our verses, *"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."* (v.8-9)

What a dramatic change for Paul! He had had it all, as far as the world was concerned. But, now he considered his past life without Christ like rotting garbage. What did he know about Jesus that was so important? He learned that his own works could not save him from God's judgment. Only Christ's life and death could cover his sins and replace his sinful life with perfection. Christ was the only way to God.

Martin Luther called Christ's righteousness alien. It does not come from this world! In life we are all affected by sin and the power of the devil. Try as hard as we may, we are imperfect and our best works are tainted by sin leading us to hell instead of heaven. Only Jesus by His sinless life could make righteousness available to us. That's what made Christ so important to Paul. He learned Christ's sacrifice on the cross forgave all sins. His resurrection from death was proof that Jesus' work was complete.

This is the righteousness that God offers to us through His Word. We have it through faith in Christ. Faith is a complete trust in Jesus as our Savior apart from anything else. It's no wonder that Paul asked, What can these "saved-by-the-law people add to salvation? Nothing! Christ has done it all! By trying to add to His saving work, there is no certainty of being saved and people jeopardize being in heaven with God.

Anything in his life that had a bad influence on Paul's faith he saw as an obstacle on his path to heaven. He wrote, *"Forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ."* (v.13-14) What things might stand in the way of our receiving the prize in Christ? When I was a teenager, it was staying out late on Saturday night and not wanting to get up for church on Sunday. But, thankfully my parents said, Either you still come to church or stop going out Saturday night. Is there anything now that we do that might keep us from reaching our goal of being with Christ? Do sports keep us from hearing Christ's Word regularly? Does extra work block us from our valuable relationship with Christ? It's not that sleep, fun activities, family events, sports, or work must be forgotten. We need reminders that they cannot replace our time with Christ to build our faith in Him. Paul wrote, *"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."* (v.7) Jesus is the most important person in our lives. He is our only way to eternal life!

Second, nothing can give us greater joy than trusting Jesus! The devil tries to convince us that popularity with people or having many talents or having all kinds of things are what will make us happy. He is lying! But our sinful nature and the sinful world want us to believe it. If we put an ad on TV guaranteeing p. 3 that everyone who came to today's service would be given \$1,000, how many people would be here today? Cars would be parked a half mile down the road and people would be standing in every open spot in the building! It's because our nature craves temporary things more than the gift of eternal life with Christ!

What gives lasting happiness? A \$1,000 won is soon spent. Things we buy wear out or we get tired of them. Even people can disappoint us and even the closest people to us can't go with us when we die. There is only one who remains with us. That's Christ! When Paul became a Christian, he lost friends and family, he lost his honorable position, and he even lost his freedom. He was writing his letter to them from prison for proclaiming Christ. Yet, he was filled with joy! He knew that his losses were a result of his close connection to Jesus. Our loss could also be our gain if it helps us focus on the goal to remain with Jesus. He will not disappoint us. He is as solid as rock mountain. His power to help us is limitless. His love is as deep as the ocean. His life and death on earth have won our prize.

Our prize is heaven. Christ will change our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body. We will have no more weaknesses or flaws. In a perfect world, there will be no sickness or pain. There will be no annoyances or things that take away our happiness. We will be able to fully live as God's people using every talent to its fullest and in a perfect world every person will appreciate us and be in harmony with what we say and do. Jesus told His followers, *"Rejoice that your names are written in heaven."* (Luke 10:20) Paul also encouraged them to stay focused on their goal. He wrote, *"Rejoice in the Lord always.... Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* (Philippians 4:4, 6)

Life for us here in this world will have plenty of obstacles. We're challenged with the wrong desires of our sinful nature and temptations from false teachers and devil trying to replace Christ with anything else. We pray that God will guide us through His Word to always see that Christ is the most important person in our lives. Christ's Word will keep our faith strong and keep us focused on the prize that is waiting for us: an eternal life of happiness with Jesus. Trust in Him! Amen.