

2018-19-19 Philippians 3:7-14 **The Prize Is Waiting!** Lent 5/Examination April 7, 2019

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God, in His grace and peace is ready to bring the greatest prize to the world through Jesus Christ. Amen.
We read from Philippians 3:7-14

These are your Words, heavenly Father. Help us take them to heart that we may win the prize in Christ.

Dear Children of God in Christ,

Every year, millions of people sign up for Publisher's Clearing House magazines hoping to win millions \$. There are 1,000's who win small prizes and a few of people win big ones. But, how does that compare with the prize that God offers? He had His Son win eternal life, not just for a few, but for all. Today God is calling people through His Word to trust in Christ and receive His greatest blessing.

The Prize Is Waiting!

First, the prize can only be won by Christ's work. The Apostle Paul had taught the Christians in Philippi that Jesus was the only person who could save them. Later, false teachers taught that trusting Christ was not enough to save them. They needed Christ and God's laws. When Paul heard about this, he was troubled that people might be turned from Christ to a salvation of works, which is no salvation at all. It would be like selling a treasure to buy garbage. Paul 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).

Paul understood these false teachers! He had been a part of them. Among the Jews, he had a good family tree, an important position, high social standing, and he was known as a godly person. That's because the Jews of Paul's time thought that they could determine what righteousness was. But, God is the ultimate judge; and His standard is perfection. Paul realized his sins when Jesus confronted and condemned him on the road to Damascus. He learned the truth from God that for anyone to enter heaven God demands "righteousness," which no one can produce. After Paul was converted, he considered his past life without Jesus to be like garbage. Who in their right mind would save rotting garbage and claim that it made their lives better?

We don't want to be misled. God's Word tells us that we deserve eternal suffering for our sins. Apart from Christ, we cannot be saved. Our works can keep us from trusting in Christ because we want to trust in them. Only Jesus' sinless life and His sacrifice on the cross can forgive us. His resurrection from death proved that Jesus' work was complete. Christ is the only way for us to win the prize of eternal life.

This gift of salvation is what God offers through His Gospel. As we hear it, the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts to trust in Jesus as our Savior apart from any works. It's no wonder that Paul asked, "What can these 'saved-by-the-law' people add to salvation?" The answer is: nothing! Christ has done it all! You cannot add to work that is finished in God's eyes! Jesus is the only way for us to be saved, not even the best of our works can add to His perfect righteousness!

Second, we press on to get the prize Christ won! The devil tries to convince us that popularity with people or talents or material things are more important than the prize of Christ. He is lying! Earlier this school year, I was at a chapel service at Kettle Moraine and the preacher offered envelopes to certain students in the crowd. Some envelopes had a picture of a pastor to remind the students that their pastor offered them the Word and Sacrament. Other envelopes had pictures of the instructors for the Word of God to remind them that they were learning Bible truths from the teachers to help them for the rest of

their lives. One envelope had a \$25 certificate for ice cream from a local restaurant. Which envelope do you think the students were hoping to get? The ice cream! It's because all of us by nature crave temporary things that give instant satisfaction more than the gift of eternal life with Christ!

But, a certificate for ice cream is soon spent. Our work, our good grades, our reputation, and even our families are all temporary in this world. In time, they will all be forgotten. There's only one true prize: it is eternal life with Christ! When Paul became a Christian, he lost friends and family, he lost his high position, and his freedom by being put in prison for years because he preached about Jesus. He was writing to Philippians from a Roman prison. And the Philippians were suffering for being connected to Christ. These losses were not easy. Paul assured them that suffering went along with following Christ.

When we suffer loss in life, it can also be for our gain if it helps us focus on the goal to remain with Jesus. Paul used the illustration of a runner, who kept looking forward to the goal and striving with all his might to reach it so that he might win the prize. Our prize is heaven. How do we best stay focused on the goal when there are many distractions in life? Anything in Paul's life that had a bad influence on his faith he saw as an obstacle in his path that led 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 our way to receive the prize in Christ? We have certain sins that are hard for us to let go of. We don't always take advantage of times to worship in God's house or read God's Word to strengthen our faith. But, sometimes even things meant for good hurt us. St Paul had trusted in his law-centered religious life before he knew Christ. We must be careful that instead of trusting only in Christ's saving work, we trust in the act of being baptized, our actions of attending church, or our going to communion. It is not what we do, even in such holy things. It is what God does through the means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. I'm not saying to forget our baptisms, communion, or worship. But, we can't trust in these things apart from Christ. God gave us these means to help us trust in Christ. Paul wrote, *"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ"* (v.7).

Earlier Paul had written the Philippians, *"He [God] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). Paul is saying that our faith in Christ depends on God. Our faith can be harmed if we neglect God's Word and the Lord's Supper. That's why we need to listen to God's Word and pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance so that we set our priorities according to the Bible. Then, He will keep our faith strong. *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well"* (Matthew 6:33). Jesus is near to us with His holy Word. He is near to us through our baptisms and in Holy Communion. By faith we look forward to the goal of seeing Jesus face to face and having Him share with us His prize of eternal life!

In heaven with Jesus, there'll be no more sin. There will be no sickness or pain to harm our perfect bodies. There will be nothing to keep us from our loving Savior. Every person in heaven will live in perfect harmony with Jesus. What a prize! We didn't create heaven, God the Father did. We didn't win the prize of heaven, Jesus did. We didn't receive the prize of heaven through anything we've done, but only as the Holy Spirit worked in faith in us to receive it. Thank God for this prize! Amen.