

Christ is the Goal

DAVE BAST

If you aim at nothing, that is exactly what you will hit, as the saying goes. So we set all kinds of goals for ourselves: A good education, a better job, higher pay, having a great family; but what if you reached all of those goals, would your life then be complete? Would you be happy and satisfied; or is there something more? Stay tuned.

DUANE KELDERMAN

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Duane, it is great to have you on the program again. We are working our way through the book of Philippians, and today we come to Chapter 3. To get into it, I wanted to talk a little bit about this idea of setting goals for our lives; or maybe we could say the values that we adopt. I can remember clearly in high school that my goal was to be a great athlete. Being a high school star? What does that mean in terms of your later life? So, values can change over the course of time.

DUANE KELDERMAN

That certainly is true in our religious life, too. They change over time and they mature, and Paul today, in Philippians 3, certainly shows us that journey that he went on. In fact, verses 4 to 7 really are a great summary of his early goals – the early way that he measured his value and what he wanted out of life.

DAVE BAST

And then how his thinking changed.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly. He lists all these things that he was living for – all these ways that he measured his worth and value as a Christian. “If others think that they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh,” he says, “I have more.” He was circumcised on the eighth day – an important part of Jewish religion – of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews – he had the right pedigree. In regard to the Law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the Church; as for righteousness based on the Law, faultless. He had a set of standards and he kept up with all those standards; and those standards were not, in and of themselves, bad; but those were the standards that he lived by and those were the standards that he thought were saving him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but then he has this great shift, and it is introduced with the word *but*: ^{3:7}But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage.

So, all these wonderful, high-quality things that he could point to in his earlier life, his thinking has totally shifted and he sees *them* as so much trash in comparison with the value of knowing Christ and being found in Christ.

DUANE KELDERMAN

I think it is really important that we be sympathetic to Paul and to all of us who have deep within us this impulse for what I call performance religion. I think there is something in us that wants to earn our own way; that wants to reduce our faith to a set of behaviors, and to perform, and to do all the right things. In and of themselves, those are not bad things. The problem comes when they are a substitute for Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, you mentioned performance religion, and Paul spells it out pretty clearly. He had impeccable religious credentials. I mean, if you think about this as a Christian testimony, we are often exposed to people who give their testimonies, and that can be a wonderful thing. It is a story – it is a narrative of conversion – but Paul’s does not follow the normal course for what we think of as a testimony. It is not: Well, I was wretched. I was a criminal. I was a drug abuser. My life was in the gutter. He is exactly the opposite. Paul was at the pinnacle. His life was, to all outward appearances, blameless. He himself uses that word, blameless, with respect to the Law. So: I had the right birth; I had the right upbringing; I went to the right schools; I had a great career; I joined the right party; I was a Pharisee; I was zealous and I was righteous, as far as I knew, with respect to God’s Law and morality.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. It reminds me of a story of something that happened to me in my first congregation. We had a nice young couple that began attending our church. They were from a small, rural community in the Midwest, and they liked the church and they seemed to be doing very well. They called me up one time and said, “We would like to get together with you.” So, I got together with them and they expressed to me a deep concern they had and confusion. They told me that they had overheard my wife and me talking to another couple after church on a particular Sunday morning, arranging for where we were going to meet for lunch after church, and they were deeply bothered by this. The point of my story – let me be very clear – the point of my story here is not in any way to denigrate Sabbath practices. I think we have to deeply respect people’s decisions about how they choose to obey the Sabbath, and we could use a little more attentiveness to the importance of the Sabbath these days, in a seven-day culture like we live in in North America. That is not the point of the story. The point of the story was that when we got together and talked about that, at one point the husband said to me, he said: Duane, what concerns me is that if we lose Sunday, what else is left? I was a young pastor then, and I am not sure exactly how I responded then, but today, in terms of Philippians 3, I would say what we have left is Christ crucified and risen. What we have left is the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

None of this amounts to anything compared with knowing Christ.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And if your whole understanding of your personal status and righteousness is wrapped up in *your* performance or *your* actions or *your* obedience, even, that is garbage compared to knowing Christ. Paul’s eyes were opened. He used to think he was blameless, and then he realized that all he was doing... You remember the story. As Paul is out there pursuing zealously those Christians, and he is going to persecute them and whip them into shape and show them how they are offending against God with this belief in Jesus the Messiah; and suddenly, he meets the Lord and everything changes. His eyes are opened, even though he is struck physically blind for a time, and he realizes: How wrong I got it.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; and again, the point is not to put down practices. In fact, in Chapter 4 we are going to talk more about the importance of Christian practices. The point is that it is not those external things – whether it is the things that Paul listed or the things that we come up with – it is not those external things that save us. What saves us

is Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well – so, let’s focus on that a little bit more. I mean, it does sound rather shocking. All these human pluses – I think that is what he means when he says, “According to the flesh, I had all these reasons for boasting.” He means on a human level – on a human scale – I had all these pluses: Birth and upbringing and religion and zeal and obedience and morality. Does it really amount to nothing? Are all our good works really worthless? Well, let’s talk about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DUANE KELDERMAN

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

DUANE KELDERMAN

We are in the book of Philippians to help us and form our life’s goals, and in this chapter now, Paul has been re-evaluating his life.

Dave, you talked about how our good works are not what save us. Does that mean that our good works are not important?

DAVE BAST

Are they worthless, as Paul says? Is it all so much garbage? In one sense, no; it is better to be good than bad. The world needs more good people, certainly; and we do not say there is no such thing as good or a good work; but I always, at least mentally, put quotation marks around the adjective *good* when they are applied to our works; and one reason is, that if you probe them deeply enough you realize they are never pure good – they are never quite good enough – because there is always something of self wrapped up in it. I mean, in order to be a truly good work, we sometimes speak of a selfless act of heroism; but there is no such thing as a one hundred percent selfless act. There is always a little bit of me in there. I am doing, yes, for you, but I am also doing it for me. I remember hearing a story... Somebody was telling me they were reading an article about a certain culture that was extremely polite, and people were always allowing the other person to go first: You go; no, you go in the room, I will go after you; but the reason this culture did that is because if you did something for the other person or allowed them to go first, you were putting them in your debt. So, it was not real, genuine goodness. It was a manipulative kind of thing to get something out of it for yourself. So that is, I think, part of the problem with our good works.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And that, of course, sets up the great exchange that Paul talks about in Chapter 3 – the exchange of our sins for Christ’s righteousness. Paul calls it a righteousness not my own but from faith in Christ. Paul had to surrender his own religion-produced, self-defined righteousness in exchange for Christ’s perfect righteousness.

DAVE BAST

This is such a drastic idea; and I do not think it exists anywhere outside of the Christian Gospel. It is very hard for people to grasp. It is very hard for us to hang onto. As you pointed out earlier, we are always wanting to slip back into the old way of justifying ourselves and our own morality and our own obedience and our own good works. The incredible news of the Gospel is: None of that works. You cannot really satisfy God. It is sort of like trying to pole vault to the moon, you know. You may say: Well, maybe I am not as good as Mother Teresa, but I am certainly better than Hitler; so, perhaps God will give me a C, and that is good enough to get me in. No, it does not work. It is only perfect righteousness, but God gives that to us for the sake of Jesus Christ.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And it is interesting that even the Church itself has had a hard time really embracing this truth. At the time of the Reformation, when this new discovery that salvation is by grace alone through faith – it is not of anything that we do ourselves – when that new discovery went throughout the Church, the established Church at that time said: You better be careful in how you talk, because if you let people think that their salvation is just by grace and not what they do, then they are not going to come to church. They are not going to give to church. They are not going to do all of things that we have them over a barrel to do right now.

DAVE BAST

Right. It certainly shook the Church to the core at the time of the Reformation because... I was just reading one of Luther's early treatises, and he attacks the doctrine of the mass, which was a huge moneymaker for the Church at the time because the teaching was: You have to pay money to have these masses said for the souls of your departed dear ones in order to get them to escape from Purgatory. Luther said: No, it does not work that way. Salvation is by grace. So, he is not only challenging the doctrine of the Church, he is challenging its financial underpinnings, and no wonder there was such a rabid counterattack. Well today, Protestant and Catholic alike, we are all agreed that salvation is by grace and money has nothing to do with it, and even our good works do not really earn and merit it. So, this powerful message has permeated; but it is hard not to slip away from that again into kind of a works righteousness.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly. I love the phrase that John Calvin used during the Reformation. He said: We are saved by grace alone, but the grace that saves is never alone. Calvin, or Jesus, or Paul were not afraid that if people understood the radical message of salvation by grace, that they would somehow be indifferent to living a transformed Christian life. They trusted that when that grace operates in us – when the Holy Spirit works this salvation in our hearts – that we will be transformed.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it goes back to what we were saying at the beginning of this segment – of the nature of good works. If you are only going to church because you think that is how you escape hell, you are not really going for the right reason; that is not really a good work; that is selfish, again. If you are only trying to do good because you think that is how you will get something out of it for yourself, that is not really a good work. Only when we are grasped by the radical nature of grace – the righteousness of Christ given to me – that transforms us and makes us do good for the right reason, which is gratitude to God. We go to church, we do things of obedience, not to earn God's favor or to please him, but because we are thankful for what he has done for us. Pretty simple; pretty basic.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly. Nothing we are saying today diminishes the importance of a godly, Christian, good life. The question is: What is the order? And as you said, the order is that we are saved by grace and then our Christian life is a response of gratitude.

DAVE BAST

You know, I think it is so poignant what Paul says here. He ticks off all these things that he had been and had done, and then he says: It is all garbage compared to knowing Christ, and I have lost everything for his sake. I think of the poignance of that because imagine, it must have been true; he must have lost his family; they turned against him, probably, when he became a Christian. He lost his job, certainly; he was no longer a Pharisee – he was no longer employed in hunting down Christians. He was rejected. His former friends – all of that – he lost it all; but compared to having the righteousness of Christ and being in Christ now, living that new life, that is what made it worthwhile – worth the sacrifice.

DUANE KELDERMAN

What you just said: In Christ – in Christ – one of the great phrases of Paul throughout his epistles – life in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Well, and that is where he goes next as he describes his new ambition, now. He has a new sense of values. He has a new address. He is no longer living in the old neighborhood. He has moved in Christ, and that gives him a new way forward as well. We will see that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*; along with Duane Kelderman, I am Dave Bast, and we are digging our way through Philippians Chapter 3 – a fabulous chapter in the New Testament – where Paul is talking about the change that has come over his life since he became a Christian, since he met Jesus Christ, and how that has turned his values around, and it also has affected the way he is living his life.

DUANE KELDERMAN

It is interesting now to hear how Paul describes his own life and his own deepest aspirations now that he knows Christ. Beginning at verse 10, he says:

I want to know Christ. Yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings; becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead. That phrase, “I want to know Christ,” really sums up the foundation of Paul’s ambition now.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is not without complication because he talks about the power of Christ’s resurrection, and there is a sort of sense that, wow, this is exciting; new life, victory, peace, hope, joy, all those great things; heaven, eternal life, all found from knowing Christ; but Paul links it to sharing in Christ’s sufferings. I not only want to know the power of his resurrection, but I want to share also – participate in his sufferings – because you cannot have the one without the other.

DUANE KELDERMAN

One of the powerful things about the Christian religion is that it accounts for suffering. There is a place for suffering, and we understand suffering, and it does not whitewash it. It does not pretend that there is not suffering. In fact, it takes our suffering and lifts it up, and it lifts it up into our relationship with Christ. Most people live on the ragged edge of life. Most people are struggling with big things in their lives. We live with deep fears, deep anxieties, deep hurts, suffering. Paul says that all of those things only drive us deeper to identify with Christ, not only in his resurrection, but also in his suffering.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I mean, we are united with him in his death and also in his resurrection. We die with Christ and we rise with Christ – that is the basic New Testament theme – and I think there is a special power in that idea to help us carry on when things go badly – when things go against us. I mean, the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, Jesus once said of himself. He died owning nothing but the clothes on his back. If we are struggling in life and struggling through life as Christians – no, we are not triumphalistic – we do not claim a gospel of health and prosperity and all that; but we do know that our suffering can bring us closer to the Lord Jesus...

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And our goal is to be in him – to be found in him.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And it is interesting that even Paul now with this new aspiration – this new perspective – this new power within him knows that even now he has not attained everything. He is not perfect. He does not have it all together. He says in verse 12:

Not that I have already attained this, or have already arrived at my goal; but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. (That double grasp; we grasp Christ, Christ grasps us.) ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Talk about living life in forward rather than in reverse – that is Paul. What was the goal? What was the prize? I think it was to know Christ. I mean, that is the basic thing that he starts out with, and he says: Yes, I know him, but I do not really know him as fully as I will, and as fully as I want to, and that is why I keep moving forward. You know, there is an active, sort of straining toward the prize. It is like he is running a race.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; and forgetting what lies behind – that little phrase. Paul had a lot to forget. Paul had a lot of things in his life that could have kept him in shackles, and he was able by God's grace – by the power of the Holy Spirit in him – to say: That does not have ahold of me. I am going to forget it. I am going to leave it behind.

DAVE BAST

One of the great comments on this verse is from Satchel Paige, the legendary pitcher who said: Don't look back; something could be gaining on you. I think that is what Paul is getting at. No, not that we totally forget the past; we glory in what God has done for us; we celebrate and we count his blessings; but the point is, we are not running always turning around and swiveling our head to see what is behind us. You do not win a race that way. You run by focusing on the finish line and on the prize. I think of Hebrews 12: Looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. That is how we run the race. Striving forward with that incredible grace and speed toward the finish.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. I think Philippians 3 is a chapter about identity – about Christian identity. It is so easy to focus upon what we do in the Christian life, and Paul is saying to us today the issue is who we are in Jesus Christ. There are all kinds of things that compete for defining us, making our identity about the clothes we wear or the income we have or the college degrees we have; and Paul says: No, none of those things define me. My essential identity is in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and what matters for everyone is this: Are you in him or still outside him?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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