

In Pursuit of the Prize

Philippians 3:8-14

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

March 17, 2013 – Fifth Sunday In Lent



In the name of the Father, and † of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. After reading through Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi one thing is obvious. These people were devoted to, and took their faith seriously. They treasured the Gospel. Hence St. Paul was able to write: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now – being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Paul wrote to encourage them in their faith and practice so that they might not grow weary or discouraged – especially in light of all the difficulties that surrounded them on every side. As devoted Christians they had a deep desire to please God – to draw near to Him in word and deed – as well as in their hearts. And, having received from God the righteousness of Christ, they wanted to live their lives in accord with His will.

The question at this point for them – and us – is how do you do that when our nature is to focus more on outward things than on that which cannot be seen? We tend to gravitate toward things that can be touched, seen or felt. For instance, the Gospel declares you righteous and holy on account of the work of Christ. But the Law shows you something entirely different – how you daily sin much and haven't lived up to the high calling of God. Like the Philippians we all have a tendency to look to the Apostles and other "heroes" of the faith, and to hold them in high esteem. In fact, we often think too highly of them. We erroneously believe that they've obtained a measure of perfection we could never possibly gain for ourselves – and then we devalue our own life and worth because we see so many of the shortcomings and sins we don't see in them.

To this way of thinking Paul says: "Rubbish!" Or, to be more precise: "I consider *everything* loss when compared to the surpassing greatness

of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. *I consider them to be manure,*" Paul says, "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." The "goal" of faith, you see, isn't that you make yourself righteous. Indeed every effort to that end – according to Paul – is no more valuable than a pile of manure! The "goal" of faith isn't for you to become more loving, kind, caring, good, faithful or whatever – but that the righteousness of Christ might be yours as an everlasting inheritance by grace through faith. And to be sure, that righteousness *is* yours already – even though it won't be fully realized until the Last Day. That's the upward prize Paul is talking about here in this text – the prize that you, as a Christian, are to pursue throughout your earthly life.

The problem is that we sinners often imagine that it's actually possible for us to achieve perfection *in this life*. But the fact is anyone who thinks this way is deceiving himself. This way of thinking will ultimately lead you to a sense of false security as you keep a record of your good works and use it as evidence of your "faithfulness." The sad truth, however, is that if you count on your own goodness you will soon become blind to sin. You'll start relying on things that seem good from a human perspective, without taking into account *God's* standard of perfection. Over time you might actually convince yourself that as you get "better and better" you're drawing closer and closer to God. But this gross form of blindness will finally cause you to lose sight of the Gospel – and to depend more and more on your own righteousness, rather than the righteousness which comes from God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Over time this deception will then lead you to despair as you realize you can never measure up. It will always end with you negatively comparing

yourself to others, so that soon your every thought will be: “Look how much better others are than I. What I need is to be more like those other Christians who *really* have their act together. I need to work harder.” It’s sad when Christians start to see things this way, because they’re being deceived. They think they need to do more and more to make their lives pleasing to God even though the truth is that in Jesus Christ they have already been declared perfect and holy and need nothing else.

True faith, dear Christian, requires you to trust *solely* in Christ – that you not worry about how things look to your fallen, human reason. Your only desire as a Christian ought to be that you remain steadfast in the true faith, and that you put your trust unswervingly in Christ’s righteousness. That’s why the Apostle writes: “It’s not that I have *already* obtained any of this, or that I have *already* been made perfect, but I press on to take hold, even as Christ Jesus has taken hold of me. Brothers, I don’t consider myself to have yet taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what’s behind and straining toward what’s ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” The picture Paul paints is familiar – a runner out ahead of the pack reaching for the goal, gaining on the finish line, stretching out to grab the gold ring. Nothing else matters. Nothing can distract him. He’s not thinking about his years of training. He doesn’t notice the other runners. His only thought is the finish line.

In the old classic movie, “Ben Hur,” there was a dangerous scene which featured a chariot race where the main character – played by Charlton Heston – was driving one of the chariots. In an interview following the filming of that scene, Heston was recounting to a reporter how difficult it had been to learn how to drive that chariot. Seeing Heston was really concerned about whether or not he would actually be able to drive his chariot to victory, the director said to him: “Don’t worry about winning the race. All you have to do is not fall out of the chariot. I guaran-

tee you will be the winner. That’s how we wrote the script!”

That’s a wonderful summary of what Paul is telling us here in the text. “Don’t worry about winning the race. That’s already a done deal. Just don’t fall out the chariot!” But for you that chariot is the true faith which God bestowed on you in Baptism – that faith by which He has strengthened you over the years through Word and Sacrament. You simply need to stay in your Baptism until the end of the race, and remain steadfast in that faith which connects you to Christ and His righteousness. Nothing can be allowed to distract you. The prize is already yours. You’re already victorious because of the victory Christ won for us all with His suffering, death, and resurrection. Nothing else matters. Remaining steadfast and looking forward to what lies ahead on the day of the Resurrection is your only objective. If you focus on that, no matter what, you’ll attain to the resurrection from the dead in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As a Christian, your life has a goal unlike any other, for God has already set that goal for you and established it forever in the One who alone can bring it to pass. By means of the faith God has given you in His Son, He’s already stripped away any false righteousness you might be tempted to seek for yourself – and in its place He’s given you the true righteousness of Christ as an eternal possession. Having received this, you are to daily turn to God in repentance and contrition, in the sure and certain confidence that our Lord Christ has already secured your eternal destiny – as you reach out to take hold of that which He has won and reserved for you. That is why you can confidently look forward to that day when you fully take hold of that goal – because it’s already been purchased for you in Christ, who promised, “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.” Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.