

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 9: Seek the highest goal

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How many times have parents said—children heard—“If I have told you once I have told you a thousand times ...”? At least, well, probably at least a thousand times, right?

This is kind of the way Paul starts the passage we are studying this week. In Philippians 3:1, however, Paul writes that to repeat himself at this point is “not trouble” because it is for their well-being. That is a far cry from the frustration of “If I told you”

The issue Paul addresses in the ensuing verses is one he had dealt with and written about before: Judaizing.

The vast majority of the earliest Christians were Jews. Some wanted to hold on to every aspect of their Jewish heritage. Many of these also demanded that any Gentile converting to Christianity must adhere to Jewish customs, even to the point of the men being circumcised.

This was a matter that, supposedly, had been dealt with earlier by the some of the apostles in what we know as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). They had decided Gentiles should be accepted as brothers and sister in Jesus, “just as they are” (Acts 15:11).

Nevertheless, Judaizing remained a problem in various places. Patient and loving with the Philippians, Paul refers to the Judaizers as “dogs” (v. 2). Paul was being sharper with that group than may be immediately apparent. “Dogs” was the very term Jews commonly used when referring to

Gentiles. One of the “edges” of the derogatory expression was that dogs would eat any kind of flesh. Jews ate only foods deemed clean by the Mosaic law. Paul was disturbed that the Judaizers, like wild dogs, through circumcision were “mutilators of the flesh.”

In verse 3, Paul writes those of Christ are not the fleshly, but the true circumcision. His confidence was in God’s love and mercy shown in the work of Jesus. It was not in works of the flesh. Such are observable behavior, but might not necessarily grow from a changed heart. Those truly circumcised worship God in Spirit. This point reflects what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman (another “dog” in Jewish eyes) in John 4:23-24.

Paul then heads off his detractors who may have challenged his objectivity. In verses 4-7, Paul describes his Jewish credentials. He was born, reared, trained and educated in Judaism. He served (in the Sanhedrin) as a devout Jew. His zeal for Judaism had even been lived out in persecution of the church.

However, Paul recognized no physical birth or physical effort can attain right standing with God. He had tried. In verses 7-11, he explains how he gave all that up to attain true righteousness. This blamelessness was found only through faith in Jesus and not works or the law, etc. It was possible through Jesus’ power and resurrection.

Further, Paul wrote that to truly know Jesus is to know him in every sense—as Lord and Savior.

One of my seminary professors, Ray Robbins, once asked me, “What would happen to us if we truly lived like Jesus?” The obvious answer is that we would die.

When Paul observed in verses 12-13 that he had not “already been made perfect,” he was not denying his salvation. His point was that of growth. Paul’s dissatisfaction with righteousness in human terms had led him to

righteousness with and from God. Now he wanted more.

Paul did not want to be like a particular runner in the recent Olympics. This athlete was winning the race, so he stopped trying and started celebrated before then end. He still won the gold and even set a new world record. It seems somewhat sad that, had he continued the intensity of his marvelous effort, his record would have been even greater.

Although he already had “won a crown of righteousness,” Paul writes of his own greater goal in verse 14. That goal is the highest one can set: the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus”—to be more and more like Jesus every day and in every way.

Many today are satisfied with simply being “good, moral people.” Some even try to be the right kind of person by attending and being active in a church. As good and as important as those things may be, they cannot bring true righteousness. That comes only by God’s grace, through our faith in the saving work of Jesus.

God loves and accepts us just like we are—sinners. We teach that salvation is the beginning of a new life. However, as a new born grows and matures he/she begins to look more and more like her/his parents. Likewise, our goal as God’s children should not be to remain as “babes in Christ.”

Nor should we be like children playing at being spiritually grown up—putting on the appearances of godliness without inward spiritual growth. Ours should be the highest goal—real maturity and growth into the image of Jesus himself.

Questions to explore

- *Is being “good, moral people” your greatest goal in life?*
- How is the goal of being more like Jesus the highest goal?

- What difference would having that goal make in your life? In how you look at others? In how you look at yourself?