

Study Sixteen

THE PRIZE OF GOD'S HIGH CALLING

We now gather together the studies in this series by showing how the one who is called must apply himself to that call.

Paul said that he pursued the goal of God's high calling in order to gain the prize, saying that he did not consider himself to have attained, at the time of writing (See Phil. 3:1–16). What were the goal and the prize he had in view? He had previously talked about gaining Christ, and righteousness, the knowledge of Christ, becoming like him in his death and the resurrection. Paul himself is not precise in identifying the prize so it is best left as a general statement to the effect that he eagerly sought the goal or prize (in this case effectively the same) which was all of the things mentioned.

The question arises: had not Paul already received Christ, and his righteousness? In fact Paul had done so, and had suffered the loss of all things and been captured by Christ. He was also confident of the resurrection (I Corin. 15:12–19). But this experience launched him into pursuit of what he already had as if to get a better grasp of what had already grasped him. In this, he felt he had not yet been perfected or even received what he wanted to receive. It should be made clear that he does not say he wanted to be worthy of what he had received, or even try to be, but that he wanted simply to fully receive it. That is, he wanted to lay hold of it with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. In the words of I Timothy 6:11f., he aimed at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness; and fought the good fight of faith, taking hold of the eternal life to which he was called.

The question now arises: how can things that are essentially gifts be made the objects of attainment? Elsewhere, Paul says that righteousness as a gift, and as the result of striving, were mutually exclusive (Rom. 4:4). This study will seek to show what great yearnings are released by the sure knowledge that we have what we long for, and the place that striving plays in the restfulness of the gospel.

We now examine the subject in detail.

REWARDS FOR WORKS

All the OT makes it clear that a man will reap what he sows (e.g. Prov. 11:18). The NT notes that God was the rewarder of those OT men who sought him diligently and that did righteous deeds (Heb. 11:6, 33).

The gospel has not changed this principle. Jesus said those who saved their lives would lose them and that whoever would lose his life for his sake would find it, and that finally, the Father would repay everyone for what he had done. (Matt 16:24–27. Also Matt. 25:21, 23, where the alternative to hearing God's 'Well done' is to be cast into outer darkness). Paul argues that this principle is good for Jew and Gentile alike (Rom. 2:6–11). James says that faith is invalid unless demonstrated by righteous actions (James 2:14–26). John sees that the righteous deeds of the saints follow them at their death, making them blessed indeed, and that they stand at the marriage supper of the Lamb clothed in the white linen of their own actions (Rev. 14:13; 19:8; see also 22:10–12, 14f.).

It is truly incredible, and the great miracle of the gospel, that finally, it does not overleap the principle that we reap what we sow, but that it causes us to sow what is worth reaping. We were chosen to produce fruit that would remain (John 15:16). Here is seen the power of the gospel to save, and the dignity which justification restores to man. A man may only work in the vineyard one hour, but he is fully paid (Matt 20:12). The thief on the cross may only pray one prayer and speak one word for God to his fellow thief, but he is promised an entrance to Paradise—and his work would be rewarded (Luke 23:39–43). This is not a doctrine of justification by works, unless one uses the provocation language of James, but the works are works without which justification cannot be shown to be valid. Paul's reference to people who will be saved, though all their works are burned away in judgement (I Corin. 3:5–15) may be seen as a loop-hole, but in view of numerous other references it cannot mean that a person would be accepted by God who had not begun, however weakly, to produce the fruits of righteousness (John 15:2, 6, 16; Matt. 21:41; Luke 6:43–45). Hence the eagerness of Jesus to examine the works of the churches in Asia and to exhort them to do their works with a burning love (Rev. 2 – 3).

UNIQUENESS OF REWARDED WORK

In view of the purity of God's judgements, what kind of works may receive his approval—and even reward? It is certainly not what is done that counts, but the reason for which it is done; a cup of water given to someone because he bears the name of Christ will be rewarded (Mark 9:41). Paul said if he preached the gospel without payment he would receive a reward because he offered it freely (I Corin. 9:17f.; cf. I Peter 5:4). The deed must be done in love or it would resound (in God's ears) like a clanging symbol, however spectacular the action (I Corin. 13). In particular, the action must be done for God, not to be seen by man, but in uncomplicated love for God (Matt. 6:1f., 4, 16–18; Luke 7:47). Such a person would come to the light, wherever that light showed itself, in the person of Christ, or his ambassadors, that it might be seen that his deeds were done in God (John 3:21).

So Christian works have their value in that they are not done with a view to earning merit, but expressing trust in God or gratefulness to him. Such works therefore can only arise from a confidence in God's willingness to forgive all sin (I John 4:19).

KNOWING CHRIST

We come now to examine the area of Paul's striving when he said that he pressed towards the goal, for the prize (Phil. 3:14). The context of the verse shows that Paul had no confidence in the flesh, or Jewish religion, or his own zealous actions and status in that religion, but rather that he counted all this as loss, or refuse, in order to gain Christ. All his confidence was in God and in Christ, and in having the righteousness of God through faith.

The specific area of his striving therefore was in knowing Christ, not academically, but personally, and in experiencing the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. For fallen human beings, there is always a battle to believe that they are included in the victory of the resurrection (which is the victory of justification, (Rom 4:25). Its inward evidences and outward proclamation are only maintained with

warfare (I Tim. 6:11f.). Paul prayed that his friends would be enlightened to know what was the immeasurable greatness of God's power in them (Eph. 1:18f.; cf. 3:14–19). He knew this could only be by the Holy Spirit (I Corin. 2:9f.). Yet he knew just as much, that it could only be entered into with eager longing. He was impressed by Abraham's struggle to believe the promise of God concerning a son, and used it to illustrate belief in justification (Rom. 4:20–25). The writer of Hebrews likewise saw the difficulty that Israel had in resting in the promise of God and urged his readers to 'strive to enter that rest'. (Heb 4:11).

Faith, to be effective, must have involvement with what it trusts (cf. James 2:14–26). That is, there are works of God and a people of God and purposes of God. To trust in God means to believe in what he is about and so be about that with God. Paul had felt within himself, the beauty of Christ's sufferings, and had been told at the outset that he would suffer for Christ (Acts 9:16). He had suffered already, yet knew there was a great gap between the manner in which Jesus suffered, and in which he suffered. He longed that the same selflessness, compassion, simplicity, and graciousness with which Jesus suffered would be his, that he may not be a mere spectator of Christ's redemptive work, but a participator.

So Paul's striving was to live in the knowledge of Christ. Knowing Christ was on the one hand something of which he was very sure, but on the other hand, something which he knew all too little of, and his actions would have showed it. Paul had discovered that knowing is a deep mine and that we all start on the surface of things. Within his knowing were large areas of unknowing and he desired not to stop until he knew even as he was known (I Corin.13:12). Basically, there are areas in all people that resist the knowledge of God and so remain strangers to its transforming qualities. Therefore there is a need to 'toil and strive' at godliness—because we have set our hope on the living God (I Tim 4:7–10).

A further problem obstructing the seeking of a true knowledge of Christ is the presence of what may be called technicians of the spirit. In everyday terms a technician may have great confidence about what he does because there are limits to the field of knowledge with which he deals. But in matters of human life, people must be open to all the phenomenon that present themselves and always be finding out what they do not know. When the church, in its anxious desire for patent solutions to problems, thinks that it may learn the knowledge of Christ, and then encapsulate and define and refine that knowing, and pass it in, it loses contact with reality. Those who assume justification and pursue holiness are merely technicians playing with forces they do not understand. To know justification in its fullness would be perfect holiness. A revelation of God's forgiveness eagerly received generates godliness of life appropriate to that revelation, but leads to a hunger to know more of that forgiveness.

So the mature saint would never tire of the gospel, and his gospel would grow in simplicity as it deepened, because it would be less confused with worldly confidence. A man who thinks that he knows everything is dangerous. Someone who truly knows may be easily recognised and trusted because of his child-like striving for what is yet to be known (I Corin. 8:2).

Paul is demonstrating in 'Philippians' that knowing Christ is not a simple fact that can be applied as a technical solution to an everyday problem, but a new creation, which even more than the first creation, can never be fully explored.

Peter shows a similar understanding in his own practical way. He says that through the knowledge of God we may become partakers of the divine nature, and adds: 'For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue and your virtue with knowledge . . .'. Those who do not do this have forgotten that they were justified. That is, the awareness of cleansing would have prompted diligence in life. So again, in Peter's practical manner, he observes that they are established in the truth, but he plans to go on reminding them of it (II Peter 1:3–15).

Therefore the struggle for every believer is to remember and really know he is cleansed from his old sins and for every part of life to be simply consistent with that. When he finds himself doing other than that, he understands there are gaps in his knowing, and that he has more knowing to do. (For other references re knowing and living, see Luke 11:34; John 6:63; II Corin. 3:4–6; 12–18; Heb. 12:1–2; 3:6; I Peter 1:13)

STRIVING, PURSUING

We may summarise now the practical implications of what we have said concerning pressing forward towards the goal, and the prize of our high calling.

Firstly the runner must *understand* the race he is running. Confusion may be a fact of life, but it is something that Christian doctrine is designed to dispel. Therefore importance must be placed on seeking the truth, and recognising error. Scripture is scathing in its denunciation of those who promote a false doctrine and mislead those who stumble in the dark. (For example, Gal. 1:8f.; Phil. 3:2; Col. 2:18; II Thess. 2:1f.; I Tim 1:3–7; I John 4:1–6).

Secondly, those who wish to reach an objective must *devote* themselves to it. The early church devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, prayer, and fellowship, and to caring for one another's needs (Acts 2:42–47). Christian leaders were to devote themselves to their work including setting an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (I Tim 4:6–16). All would then see their progress and hopefully emulate their example. This would necessarily involve, practise, toiling, striving, training and habit forming, but, as Paul noted, godliness had much greater value than physical prowess for which many are prepared to work hard. (It is worth noting how the word 'devotion', in Christian circles, has lost its true meaning. One can hardly have a period of devotion, especially if it is only a preamble to something else!)

Thirdly, those who want to arrive at their goal must *focus* their energies, and *look forward*, not running aimlessly (I Corin. 9:24–27). One must aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, if one plans to have them (II Tim. 2:22). So the whole concentration of human endeavour is anticipated and called forth by the gospel. Believers will not dissipate their energies on sin that clings closely, but cast it aside as an unnecessary weight (Heb. 12:1–2) and yield themselves to God, and their faculties to him as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:12–14).

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James says that a double minded man, unstable in all his ways will not receive anything from the Lord (James 1:6–8). Peter calls on his readers to gird up the loins of their mind and set their hope fully on the grace of God (I Peter 1:13). A multitude of other references show that all of man's capabilities must be focussed so as to fully grasp hold of the gospel. It is because people sought Jesus with inadequate motivation that he sometimes spoke sternly about the cost of being a disciple. (Luke 14:25–33).

Paul said that in eagerness to press forward to the goal, he forgot what he had done before. (Although he would never forget what God had done), Accomplishment is nothing to build on, nor an adequate guide to the future. Naturally, we can only proceed from where we are—and that may include many habits and experiences of value. But the future hope is what draws us on.

Jesus asked his disciples not to rejoice in their accomplishments, but that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20). He knew that they would tend to make idols of what had been done by their hands (as with many other Biblical characters).

One hesitates to make anything like a list of things to do because of the tendency we have to climb the accomplishment ladder. All the striving of a Christian is part of a mysterious relationship between Christ and his church that, like all love relationships, defies analysis. When a man has done all he can do, he still would think of himself as an unprofitable servant and wonder that he had done anything of value. Love draws him on, and draws from him all that is truly human. For this reason, the most important thing is to keep one-self in the love of God, and if there is a loss of impetus at any point, that is the place to pick up the race again. That is its beginning, its end, and our hope of perseverance.