

Philippians 3:7-11 - 10th after Pentecost (24.7.2016).

What is it that really counts!

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! [NLT]

Anyone who has tried to change their diet and their lifestyle may know just how difficult it is to keep at it. At first you may still be very focussed on the need to change your diet - it may be as a result of a serious issue with your health like a heart attack which convinces you that you need to change.

As time goes on, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the discipline you need in what you eat, and in taking regular exercise. Ice-cream - whatever is your favourite 'vice' - becomes increasingly difficult to bypass when you are offered a helping. Finding time to exercise is no longer so much fun, because you need to keep at it.

Is it not very similar as far as living as followers of our Lord is concerned. We may have made a firm decision to change how we live, how we speak to others - but after the initial phase, it becomes more and more difficult to keep at it. Before long we may believe that we start making excuses why it's OK to keep on living as before - after all, does God not love us?!

Living as people of God - being changed and living as the new people of God is not just an option we can take or leave as we wish. The question which will help us set the priorities for life is very straightforward:

What is it that really counts!

That is not only a question for the 21st century, but it has been the question

people have been faced with all along. What is the most important thing in your life?

For Paul it had been observing the rituals and practices he had grown up with. As a Pharisee he had devoted his life to keeping the various religious observances - even more than were required by the Bible. His dedication to these things had been undisputed, yet when Christ had entered his life, all this was suddenly turned upside down - he realised that all he had done, really did not count. That is why he could write here, **I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.**

He had tried to live a life which was pleasing to God - by which he thought he did more than was required of him, but his best efforts were absolutely worthless! The problem was that for people like the Pharisees, it was all about what they did, about their observance of the laws and traditions, but they remained who they were.

Doing things for show - but in the end nothing has changed. Is that not a danger for us also that we strive to give a good impression here at church and when we are in company? But then, as soon as we are with our family, when we believe nobody knows us, we revert to our old way of doing things.

Sometimes it seems that we are so concerned with ourselves and with the way we want things to be done that we forget what Christ has done for us.

And the one thing Christ has done for us, is that he has made it possible for us to change! This is a change, however, which is not in step with the changes we see around us in our world or in society. It is a change by which we are to be put right with God again. It is a change by which we come to realise, what it is that **really counts!**

When Christ entered Paul's life he was forced to reassess his set of values. Until then he had believed that he just had to keep on doing the things he was doing - and that he would be acceptable to God as a result of his good works (an important part of this seemed to be that one had to be seen doing these good works / there was a need to be acknowledged for what one did). But all of that changed, as he now realised, **I no longer count on my own righteousness through**

obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

What is it that really counts in your and my life? Paul's life changed totally - to have carried on the way he had before would have been totally foolish! Paul would have had every reason to stay exactly as he had been - after all he could say of himself, **I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin – a real Hebrew if there ever was one!** (V. 5)

It does not cease to amaze just how much this erstwhile Pharisee allowed his entire life to be turned on its head. And yet, this change was not simply a once-off happening. In the verses following this passage we read what Paul says about on-going change in his life: **I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.** (V. 12)

Change does not happen overnight - not for Paul, and not for us. It is an ongoing process in our lives to become the people Christ has called us to be. There may be times when we despair, because we have tried so hard to live as his people - only to fall back on the same old way of doing things. It's a bit like the game of 'Snakes and Ladders' - when we have a special celebration and things are going well, it may seem like we have climbed a ladder almost to the top, only in the next moment to land on a snake, and slide all the way down again.

What may cause us to slide, is when we focus on our self-chosen goals - goals which are in line with what our world tells us. We have been encouraged to think that it should be all about having as much fun as possible - but that is harmful for our physical as well as for our spiritual being. Like Paul, we have to shift our focus: **Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.** (V. 13-14)

For Paul the past was all those things he had relied on - his ancestry, his earnest endeavour to live a pure life according to set rules and rituals. Doing these things may have seemed to lead him all the way up the heavenly ladder -

and yet he was brought to realise that all his efforts brought him to land on a snake that brought him down.

Paul had, however, come to realise what really counts - he knew that it was only by accepting the change that Christ brought about in his life, and by focussing on the prize for which God had called him, that he would reach the end of the race.

What is it that you and I have to put behind us? Are they not those things which prevent us from looking forward to what lies ahead? The things which hold us back from pressing on to reach the end of the race? We have to live our lives with regard to our goal. If, e.g., it is your goal to lose weight, you can't just haphazardly go about it. You need to find out what your diet must be like - what the things are you need to avoid, and what you should be eating. It is about having somebody to keep on encouraging you when you feel that it's all a waste of time.

Is the same not true for our life as people of God - it is not about what we think, but of hearing what God's Word tells us. We need to make sure that what people tell us about the way we are to lead our life is in line with what God's Word tells us. We need to find out what we should do - and what we need to avoid. And we need people that we trust to encourage us when we feel despondent about not living the way we know we should.

Change is not an option - it is part of our life as followers of Christ. Christ has won the heavenly prize for us - it belongs to us. Now it is about keeping it, and living toward our goal at God's side in eternity.