

Sunday 26th November 2023.

Followers of the Way Series

‘Life-giving principle – Simplicity’ Tom Yacomeni

Philippians 3v7-14 Pressing on towards the goal

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What 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, that I may gain Christ ⁹ 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 on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all 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. ¹³ Brothers 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 toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

After a two week pause for Remembrance and Missions Sunday, this week we are returning to our Autumn sermon series.

We’ve been looking at this book by Simon Reed called ‘Followers of the way’ which looks at 10 characteristics or ‘Waymarks’ of the Way of Life inspired by ancient practices of Celtic Christianity and adopted by the Community of St. Aidan and St. Hilda. As well as the 10 waymarks which include things like lifelong learning, journeying with a soul-friend and keeping a rhythm of prayer and work and recreation, Simon highlights three ‘life-giving principles’ which can really help us mature as Christians, connect more deeply with God and connect God with the whole of life.

The three life-giving principles are Simplicity, Purity and Obedience, which echo the monastic vows for a consecrated life traditionally known as 'the evangelical counsels'. So for the next three weeks we are going to look at Simplicity, Purity and Obedience in turn and asking the question what do these principles mean for us today.

You might recall that I spoke back in September about 'Living as simply as possible' which was the fourth Waymark in our series. That means being aware of the temptations of consumerism and materialism, prioritising worship instead by keeping generosity and hospitality front and centre when it comes to our time and possessions.

Well today's life-giving principle of Simplicity is more about keeping the main thing the main thing. When I started at All Saints in October last year I felt like the Lord told me I needed to keep a steady hand on the tiller and make sure we keep the main thing the main thing. Well thankfully I feel we are steering a steady course, but I recognise it is still all too easy for me and us to get distracted from our core purpose as a Church. Let's be clear: We are here to share the life and message of Jesus. Along with the other churches we are the body of Christ in our neighbourhood, we are commissioned to preach, proclaim and demonstrate the Gospel message and share the abundant life and vitality that the Holy Spirit brings. We work out on a daily basis what that means - forgiveness, reconciliation with God and each other, sharing faith, hope and love. But sometimes I think we forget that God has given the gift of handing out the greatest treasure on the planet! What a privilege it is to be ministers of the Kingdom of God, when so many are struggling to find meaning and purpose in life. And it's only set to get worse: At the recent AI summit convened by Rishi Sunak, Elon Musk said that for humanity "One of the challenges in the future will be how do we find meaning in life if you have a magic genie that can do everything you want."

Well our meaning in life comes not from technological progress or instant gratification but from humbly seeking the presence of the Creator. John McFadyen called it 'the Divine Pursuit', Tozer called it 'The Knowledge of the Holy'. In today's passage the Apostle Paul calls it the heavenly prize.

The quest to know Christ, he says, is worth more than anything else, so much so that everything else is garbage in comparison. He says in verse 7: ⁷ 'whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What 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.'

The Philippian Church were still at loggerheads with each other over their Jewish heritage. They wanted all new Christian converts to be circumcised because only then would they properly qualify as God's chosen children.

But Paul says look – if Jewish status is what you are after I am fully qualified and accredited up to my eyeballs, but I now consider my former status, reputation, education, achievements – all garbage compared to knowing Christ.

What would it be for us today? Career, wealth, qualifications, contacts? Or what about in Church terms: Denominations, Buildings, budgets, - perhaps important in the short term, but compared to knowing Christ? Rubbish.

There are plenty of books on sale all about prioritising: 'The 80/20 principle', 'Getting things done', 'The organised mind', 'The one thing', and the current best seller 'Eat that Frog!'

But for Paul there is only one priority that really matters. Verse 10: 'I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings'

So Paul defines our Purpose as Christians and that is simply: *To Know Christ*

Tozer wrote in his book *The knowledge of the Holy*: 'To know God is at once the easiest and the most difficult thing in the world. It is easy because the knowledge is not won by hard mental toil, but is something freely given. As sunlight falls free on the open field, so the knowledge of the holy God is a free gift to men who are open to receive it. But this knowledge is difficult because there are conditions to be met and the obstinate nature of fallen man does not take kindly to them.'

Tozer goes on to discuss the biggest problem that hinders our knowing which is a distorted view of who God really is. When we make God in our own image, or mould his character to suit our desires that is idolatry. The need to cleanse yourself from idolatry is a frequently recurring theme throughout the Bible.

In the Old testament it was a physical process of clearing idols from the homes of the Israelites.

We looked last term at the Journey to the promised land and before the Israelites actually crossed the Jordan, Joshua told them to Consecrate themselves. Before Moses climbed Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the law, he told the people to consecrate themselves.

For us consecration means getting rid of false ideas and images of God and instead bowing down in reverence and humility before the God who made the universe with a few words. I think one of the precursors to revival is a renewed humility and a sense of awe. Not just at what God does but at who he is.

Knowing Christ starts with a posture of humility and a willingness which turns away from false ideas about God and the sin that so easily entangles.

RT Kendall points out in his book 'the Anointing' "Being granted repentance, what Paul calls being 'changed from glory to glory' is the proof that we are hearing from God. He deals with us, shows us our sin, we repent and walk in the light and know sweet fellowship with him"

The next step for me in knowing Christ after repentance is making Him my thought basis. I sieve the scriptures for every reference to Him, and delight when I find something about him that grabs me. I talk to other people about Him. I ask him all the time to reveal himself more to me.

When we read the stories of Jesus do we God, full of grace and truth? Or do we simply see a nice man who is always forgiving and lets us do whatever we want? Some of Jesus teaching and challenge is extremely uncomfortable. Taking up our cross daily is not really an easy option.

That is why Paul suggests that knowing Christ will not only be accompanied by life-giving power, but also suffering. Just as Jesus experienced resurrection power and the new life of the Spirit, he also had to endure the excruciating pain of the cross in order to release it. But he did it for the joy set before him. The joy of sharing the Father's love.

So we have a simple purpose, but Paul also reassures us with a simple perspective. He says in verse 13 'One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on towards the goal

When it comes to seeking God We need to look forwards not backwards. Like the Angels told Lot not to look back towards Sodom during its destruction, we mustn't look backwards letting our past define us. Tozer says 'you can have as much of God as you want'. But that means fixing our eyes on Jesus in the here and now, putting our best foot forward and seeking him. Thankfully with Christ each day is a brand new opportunity to seek the Kingdom of God.

So we have a simple purpose, a simple perspective and finally we aim for a simple Prize.

Paul is looking forward with joy to winning the heavenly prize which is the words from the Father that we read in Matthew 24: 'Well done good and faithful servant, come and share your master's happiness'.

As R.T. Kendal puts it in his book 'the anointing'

"It is a wonderful feeling that comes from knowing that you please God. Not man. God. And it is within the grasp of every single one of us".

How do we please God? Jesus gave us the answer at the end of the sermon on the mount. 'Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness and everything else will be added to you'.

When we prioritise the Lord in our life, committing each day to him then our life becomes a prayer.

St. Basil the Great said 'This is how you pray continually – not by offering prayer in words, but by joining yourself to God through your whole way of life, so that your life becomes one continuous and uninterrupted prayer.'

We need the Holy Spirit to help us go deeper in our knowledge of Christ:

Ezekiel 37v2-6

I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath^[a] enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. **Then you will know** that I am the LORD.’”