

WHAT DO YOU STRIVE FOR?

PHILIPPIANS 3:4B-14

What do you strive for? What do you put your energy into, and why?

It's interesting how some young people believe they **MUST** have a house (and children, and nice car and swimming pool and plasma tv screen and so on and son on) before they start thinking about putting money aside for a wedding. It is often difficult to convince such people that the wedding – and the piece of paper called a wedding certificate – is actually a symbol of their relationship and commitment to each other.

But that's what many young couples strive for: house and children, before marriage!

Perhaps you strive for success in your work: to climb the corporate ladder, or establish the perfect home or business.

The thing is, whatever is important to you, you will put the effort into it.

The same is true for how one sees one's relationship with God.

St Paul in this passage from Philippians is talking about two types of striving for God. Both types can look almost identical. Both have to do with one's relationship with God. But at heart they are eons apart.

The first type of striving Paul talks about was what he did when he was a Pharisee – a Jew:

^{4b}*Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!*

⁵*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! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. [NLT]*

Paul was an excellent Jew. Listen again to the key points he makes: 1. circumcised; 2. pure-blood; 3. of Benjamin (regarded as one of the more faithful Jewish tribes); 4. a Pharisee; 5. zealous. And he knew exactly how to strive through his efforts in order to be right with God.

The parallel for us Lutherans would be like saying: 1. baptised; 2. no non-Lutheran ancestors; 3. of Luther's family; 4. of the ante-women's ordination and ante-modern worship and women-must-wear-hats-in-church group; and 5. no fellowship with any other Lutheran denomination, let alone people from any other Christian denominations or religions. And keeping all that would convince us that we are somehow close to God! At least, closer than anyone else.

So Paul was like what so many people believe today: That somehow we

get into God's good books by being good – or at least by not being too bad.

But Paul came to know that that way of striving was all rubbish:

⁷I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸Yes, 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 ⁹and 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. ¹⁰I 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, ¹¹so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! [NLT]

The way of striving to be right with God by one's own efforts is "worthless". The word Paul uses for "worthless" actually means "destructive". Far from bringing about a good relationship with God, striving after doing good as a means to be right with God only makes things worse.

But even more, he calls all this way of striving to be right with God "garbage"; and this word literally means dung – human faeces.

He is incredibly harsh on himself. His whole former religious life – all that "goodness" as a Pharisee – is pollution!

And he's right. For what God wants of us is that we have faith in him. That we trust God.

Martin Luther explained it very well in the Large Catechism:

What does "to have a god" mean, or what is God?

Answer: A "god" is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart.

But to strive to be right with God through our own efforts means we are putting our trust in ourselves, and not in God!

Far better, as Paul says, is to know Christ.

Now, St Paul means far more than just knowing some information about Jesus when he writes to know Christ. What he really means is to believe in Christ: to trust him to establish a good relationship between God and oneself. 'Knowing' here is based on the Old Testament word for 'knowing', which has a sense of intimacy and closeness to the other person who is known.

All the things Paul thought he had to strive for, God gives him simply by trust in Jesus Christ.

Jesus saves! And that salvation is received through a simple child-like trust in Jesus.

And so now St Paul talks about striving again:

¹²I 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. ¹³No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, [NLT]

On the outside, this sort of striving would look much the same as Paul's striving to be good when he was a Pharisee. For it is also about striving to do God's will in one's life. It is also about keeping the Ten Commandments and so on.

But at heart, it is enormously different.

For it isn't about trying to be right with God, or to climb up a religious 'sainthood ladder'.

It's about striving to live up to who one is: One is a child of God by the grace of Jesus Christ. One is a citizen of heaven. Now one is to aim to live as such a person as much as possible, seeking God's help through the Holy Spirit to do so.

But be clear on what this means, it is not about trying to be right with God.

And it is not about doing this because one HAS TO.

It is about being free in God's love to become more and more who one is in Jesus: a dear child of God.

The feeling behind these words of Paul is not a sense of having to, but of being free and excited about being able to do so.

Sometimes people say something along the lines of "being Christian is being kind to others".

I usually see a red flag when I hear such words.

True, kindness to others will be a fruit – an expression – of our faith and love in God. But it is wrong to call such good works "Christianity". Many non-Christians, including atheists, do 'good works'.

And to think of the matter a different way: I also see a red flag when I hear someone say: "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I can worship God on a mountain top."

True, one does not "have to" go to church on a Sunday. But how can Christ nurture one's faith and love without the "food" that faith and love needs in order to grow? We need Jesus' grace through word and sacrament for faith and love to grow; and Christ has arranged his church so that the chief place that nurture happens is in our worship together each week.

But there is no rule. What there is is realizing one's "soul hunger", and how Jesus satisfies that hunger.

So here is a constant challenge for Christians. What do we mean by a Christian ethic? Many would simply answer "The Ten Commandments". But that is not an adequate answer. When Christ commanded us to love as

we have been loved (John 15), and the apostles wrote about the necessity of Christian love, they had something quite different in mind than just keeping the Ten Commandments. For Christian love always comes from Christ.

To put the matter probably too simply, in every matter we need to consider what it means that ¹⁴*Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.* ¹⁵*And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.* [2 Corinthians 5:14-15, TNIV].

Summing up: Christianity is trust in Christ; nothing more and nothing less. That's the heart. The rest is what we each have decided is how we will express that faith and love for God that Christ has put in our lives.

And so we each, in our own ways, *press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.* [NLT]

Amen.