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Pursuing a Goal of Surpassing Value

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PHILIPPIANS 3:1-16NRSV

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! ³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— ⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold fast to what we have attained

Do you have any goals in your life these days? We're a long ways from the New Year, but I suspect you might have a goal or two that you're working on. Maybe to get more exercise, lose a few pounds, take a yoga class, spend more time with your family; maybe to get more sleep, read a good book, get away to the lake, or maybe even to shoot your age in golf. The list can be almost endless.

So, if you have a goal or two, how's it going for you? I'm seeing more and more Fitbits on people's wrists. That's one way to track our goals. People are using them for everything from counting their steps, to tracking their heart rate, to measuring their REM sleep. A website describes a Fitbit in positively glowing terms: "Every moment matters and every bit makes a big impact. Because fitness is the sum of your life." That's quite a claim. Do you buy it?

Where do these goals of ours come from? Probably from the things we value in life. Things like: health, wellness, family, career, food, music, travel, leisure. What we value tends to show up in how we spend our time and our money. And time and money are often put to work in pursuit of our goals, whether or not we ever get around to naming them as such.

Kris Oppegard, on the staff here at Zumbro, and her twin sister, Beth Napton, had a goal of running the half-marathon last weekend in Rochester. I asked Kris why she did it. There were lots of reasons: she likes running with her sister, staying healthy, developing good habits, using it as a stress release. These are values for Kris. I'm happy to report that despite the heat and humidity, Kris and Beth crossed the finish line together in 2 hours and 30 minutes. Training for the race and running it together felt like a great accomplishment for them, and it was. That was their goal.

Paul is talking about goals in our reading from Philippians, and in particular, one of his own goals. I hate to say it, but Paul doesn't mention anything about running a half marathon, or getting a full eight hours of sleep, or striving for upwards of 10,000 steps in a day. Now, please hear me: these are not bad goals. Taking care of our bodies is a good thing. But do we really want to say that fitness is *the sum of our lives*? I seriously doubt that on our deathbed any of us will cry out: "Man, I wish I would have spent more time at the gym."

Paul shares his goal with the Philippians: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection." My hunch is that by spending time in prison, and facing the all-too-real possibility of death, Paul's focus has sharpened considerably. He's come a long way on his journey of faith. Ever since Jesus showed up the road to Damascus, when Paul was intent on tracking down and persecuting Christians, his goals have been getting rearranged. He's gone from persecutor to preacher, from working *against* Jesus to following *after* him, from tearing down churches to building up new ones.

So why is Paul talking about his goal? Because there are spurious preachers in Philippi who are leading the congregation astray. Specifically, they're peddling a gospel of circumcision. We don't know all the details, but it's not hard to imagine. Most likely these preachers converted from paganism, to Judaism, and eventually to Christianity. Along the way, they got circumcised – they became Jews first. And then they got baptized and became Christians. As is common in religious circles still today, people tend to make their experience normative. In other words, *You must do it just as I did, or you're not a true Christian.*

Paul gets angry with these preachers. No big surprise there. Paul gets angry with anyone that puts confidence in human achievement over against what Christ has done. Paul knows the gospel they're peddling all too well. He has a long and impressive list of things he used to value: "I was circumcised on the eighth day, which means I've been part of God's covenant people from the very beginning. I'm of the tribe of Benjamin, which means I can trace my lineage all the way back to Jacob and the patriarchs. I'm the son of Hebrew parents, which

means there's no Gentile blood mixed in with my Jewish blood. I was trained as a Pharisee, which means I've devoutly followed the laws of Moses in every possible way. Add it all up," Paul says, "and I am blameless."

Now, if Paul were a bookkeeper, he'd be way ahead on the credit side of things. But here's the deal: Paul's not keeping score anymore, and he's convinced God's not keeping score either. Paul goes on to make a radical claim: "I regard all these things from my past as loss - I'm throwing them out with the trash, along with everything else I used to take credit for. Why? Because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Paul is telling quite a story. When you think about it, when people tell stories of their conversion, like Paul, they often talk about leaving their former life behind. Regularly they have a long list of dark and lurid sins, empty ambitions, messed up relationships. In a sense, they're saying their conversion means leaving all the bad things behind for the sake of Christ. But that's not Paul's story. Paul is leaving behind all the best things of his life - all those things he valued most - so that he might know Christ.

Paul compares the Christian life to running a race. He's not running in order to get saved. God has already taken care of that. But he is running for the sheer joy of being a follower of Jesus. And because God is no longer keeping score, Paul is able to run without watching his feet or counting his steps. No, he's able to trust his future entirely to God.

Despite his seeming confidence, Paul speaks with a dose of humility: "Oh, it's not that I've already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own." *How great is that?* "There's one thing I do," says Paul. "Forgetting what lie behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ."

So, let me ask you, what are we supposed to do with a passage like this? We're not sitting in a prison cell, after all. We're not fighting a gospel of circumcision. We're not looking to start any new churches in the Roman Empire. So what do we do? How we answer this question probably goes back to what we value in life, just like it did for Paul. What's important to us? What gets us up in the morning? What kind of mark will we make?

Perhaps you've been following the story of Pastor Jesse Duplantis. Pastor Jesse is a televangelist from New Orleans. He made news this past week because he wants his congregation to buy him a brand new \$54 million Gulf Stream jet. He says he needs it for his work of evangelism. For the doubters, he has a ready reply: "If Jesus Christ were physically on the earth today, he would not be riding a donkey. He'd be in an airplane flying all over the world." The evangelist paraphrases our passage for today: "Whatever God has put on your heart to have or to do requires that you move toward it - it requires that you let go of what is behind, and press forward to what is ahead. In other words, ADVANCE." Oh, and there's one more thing: Pastor Jesse says that after he raises the \$54 million, he will donate his old jet to charity. And isn't that nice?

You know what I think when I hear a story like this? I gotta get a better gig. *Just kidding!* Like a lot of Americans, it rubs me the wrong way too. It's so incredibly easy for those of us who are Christians to remake Jesus in our own image. It's so easy for our goals to be determined solely by our wants and wishes, and not by the Jesus who shows up on the pages of the New Testament. "I want to know Christ," Paul says, "that's it." And then he adds, "I'm willing to share in his sufferings and join him in his death. And if there's any way to get in on the resurrection, I want that too."

Let's be honest: We don't have any control over Jesse Duplantis. But we don't need to send him any money. And we don't have to endorse his prosperity gospel. Rather than simply

dismiss him, however, I think it's important that we compare his values with our own. What's different about us? What kind of goals do we have? What kind of mark will we make?

Here's another example. Barb Willard of Zumbro died this past Monday. Her husband Mike and their two daughters were at her side. The funeral was Friday. Barb had been battling Parkinson's Disease since the spring of 2013. At the funeral we told stories of Barb growing up on a farm near Storden, Minnesota; stories of her attending a little country church and learning the teachings of Jesus at an early age; stories of Barb's mother who was very kindhearted and always looking out for others. "Perhaps it comes as no big surprise," said Mike, "but Barb's goal in life was to show concern for others, and especially for her family."

Barb's concern was present throughout her lifetime, but it was evident in three primary ways. The first was with Heidi, Barb and Mike's middle daughter. In her late teens, Heidi began suffering from depression and then chronic back pain. She often dealt with it through alcohol and pills. Sadly, this led to addiction. In the midst of the turmoil, Barb was willing to come to the emergency room at any hour of the day or night. She never stopped loving her daughter. Second, Barb arranged for her mother and mother-in-law to move to Rochester so she could look after them. Her mother spent the last eight months of her life living with Barb and Mike as she battled leukemia. Barb didn't want anyone to have to suffer alone. And third, when Heidi tragically died of an accidental overdose, Barb quit her job so she could look after Heidi's children, Arianna and Aiden. As Barb saw it, there was nothing more important than providing a home for those children and getting them off to a good start.

Friends, what kind of goals do you have? What kind of mark are you making? There are any number of persons to which we could compare ourselves, including the Apostle Paul, Jesse Duplantis, and Barb Willard. What I would suggest, though, is that first you consider your values. What's most important to you? What gets you out of bed in the morning? How do you want to be remembered?

Fitbit might claim to be the sum of our lives, but I'm not buying it. How about something more? How about knowing Christ? How about devoting your time and money to him? If you do, you might just find a goal unlike any other. Indeed, you might find a goal of surpassing worth. Amen.