

I read the other day that following Brexit a new agricultural bill's being introduced that's described as one of the most significant pieces of legislation for farmers in over 70 years.

And part of the bill details terms and conditions that will have to apply if farmers and landowners want to receive funding.

So, for example one of the conditions is to set goals that will help the environment.

Things like promoting clean air and water, helping wildlife to thrive, and reducing the risk of environmental hazards, like flooding.

And setting goals really helps whenever you want to achieve something, whether that's in farming or everyday life.

So, for example some of us like to set health and fitness goals, by aiming to lose weight, exercise regularly, and eating more healthily.

And maybe you've got a particular goal in your own life that you're aiming towards at the moment.

Well in that reading from Philippians earlier we see that the Apostle Paul has set himself a goal.

So, in verse 8 he says: "I count everything loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

And so, like an athlete competing for a gold medal; Paul's goal is to know Christ better.

Now to give you a bit of background, Paul's responding to a group of people called judaizers, who are promoting the idea that for God to accept them, the men in church should be circumcised.

You see in the Old Testament, male circumcision was as a sign of God's covenant with the nation of Israel, and a sign that they were God's people. But with the arrival of Jesus all those Old Testament rules and regulations, including circumcision, no longer applied.

As a result, to say that Paul's not very happy with these judaizers, is to put it mildly.

So, in verse 2 he calls them:

"Dogs, evil doers, and those who mutilate the flesh."

And the reason Paul uses such strong language is because it's a direct attack on the Gospel itself.

So, if Paul was writing today, he might say something like this:

It doesn't matter how many times you go to church, how much money you put in the collection plate, or how hard you try to be a good person, God doesn't accept us based on what we do or don't do.

And to argue his point Paul gives us a list of his own religious credentials:

Verse says: If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, or pride in what they do, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

In other words, Paul says his religious pedigree's impeccable; and if anyone can boast about getting right with God based good on works, then it's Paul.

You see he was born into the right family, belonged to elite group of men known for their strict adherence to God's law, and was zealous in carrying out his religious duties

But what does he say about these things in verse 7:

Whatever gain I had; I count as loss for the sake of Christ. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish.

Why? Well because Paul understands that everything he's done up to now; all the religious goals he's set himself, are a complete load of rubbish; literally a pile of dung because they can't make him right with God.

As a result, Paul's goals change don't they, so that he can say in verse 8:

"I count everything as loss; because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Now you might be here this morning and you're thinking to yourself, is Paul actually telling me that after years of faithfully serving the church, and trying my hardest to be a good person, that it counts for nothing!

Well yes that's exactly what he's saying.

But only if we think God will accept us by doing them.

Now of course that might raise another question, that goes something like this:

"If God doesn't accept me based on anything I do, be it religious or otherwise; *then how* can I get right with him?"

Well Paul tells us:

He says it's not by trying; it's by trusting

Verse 8 says: "For Jesus sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

In other words, Paul says when we put our trust in Jesus, his perfect life and obedience are given to us as a free gift.

As a result, the constant struggle of trying to impress God or earn his favour, comes to an end because Jesus has done all the work for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

So just imagine for a second, you're going to meet the queen; but the only clothes you've ever owned are horrible filthy rags; but then suddenly someone replaces them with a spotless designer outfit.

Well in a spiritual sense that's what happens to everyone who puts their trust in Jesus.

He covers all their sin by clothing them with his perfect life.

As a result, they're ready to meet God who doesn't see their filthy rags of sin anymore, he sees his spotless Son.

Well it's because of that new life in Christ that Paul goes on to say in verse 10, that he wants to know Jesus better, and experience the power of his resurrection, and even share in his suffering.

You see Paul's aware that the more he gets to know Jesus, and makes Jesus known, the more he'll be called to suffer for him.

Which is exactly what Jesus warns his followers to expect.

So, for example in John's Gospel Jesus says:

Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.

Or as the German Reformer Martin Luther once put it:

If they gave our Master a crown of thorns, why do we hope for a crown of roses?

But the good news is that although I might experience suffering and rejection now; it also means I can look forward with certainty, to a glorious future in heaven, because I also share in Christ's resurrection life.

As a result, our goal like Paul's, will be to know Christ better.

And of course, like any relationship it has to be worked at.

But you know I read recently that 60% of Anglican's never read their Bibles; even though every page is about Jesus; and only 38% of Christians pray regularly.

But you know if I never read my Bible or made time and space to pray; I'd never really get to know Jesus in the same way that Paul did.

Now of course I might know of him because I come to Church, sing about him in the hymns, and hear about him in the sermon.

But I never get beyond the point of simply knowing about Jesus, which is different to having a relationship with him isn't it.

So, for example I know a lot about David Bowie because I'm a fan; but I never knew him personally.

But Paul didn't just know *about* Jesus, he made it his goal to know him.

You know one day you and me are going to see Jesus face to face.

And so, wouldn't it be terrible when we do to hear him say those words to us from Matthew's Gospel:

"Depart from me, I never knew you."

Well after 34 years of marriage I love Maria more now than I did when I first met her because over the years our relationship has grown deeper the more, we've got to know each other.

But can you imagine if I constantly ignored her, or we never made time for each other.

Well eventually the relationship would grow cold and just fizzle out wouldn't it.

Well to avoid the same thing happening with Jesus, Paul encourages us to make it our goal to know him better.

And we do that by praying regularly, reading the Bible, and sharing fellowship together.

And you know the great thing is Jesus wants us to get to know him, and spend time with him, because he loves being in a relationship with us.

Finally, before any big competition athletes train hard and then compete for the prize of a medal; and the recognition for being the best at their sport.

Well in verse 13 Paul says: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ.”

In other words, leaving his old religious life behind him, Paul presses on for the prize of knowing Jesus, and the life and freedom that he offers.

And so, I close with this:

Paul had been a religious fanatic, earnestly building a religious resume that he thought would impress God and keep him happy. But when he met the living Lord Jesus everything was made right side up because Paul realised that relationships don't work by rituals or impressive performances.

And relationships are what life is all about, especially a relationship with our creator.

So, let's be encouraged along with Paul to press on towards the goal of knowing Christ, who loves being in a relationship with us.

Amen