

FOOL'S GOAL

You know what fool's gold is. It is bright and sparkly. It looks like we think gold ought to look. But it is not worth anything. That is, it has none of the properties of true gold. You cannot purify it, smelt it, melt or shape it into anything useful. It just flakes out and falls apart. So you can work just as hard looking for, gathering, and storing fool's gold as real gold. You can even feel quite successful because it is easier to find. But after all your efforts, you have nothing valuable. It is, to revive an old phrase, *a waste of time and life*.

Yes, well, the way to end up in a Fool's Paradise is to go after Fool's Goal. A Fool's Goal, like fool's gold, appears to be valuable at first glance. But on closer examination, it has no true worth. When you try to use it or call on it, it flakes out and falls apart. Yet many people are fascinated, hoodwinked, spellbound for years by Fool's Goal. Some people even die with piles of Fool's Goal stored away, just as some miners died with a pile of fool's gold hidden away. They thought they were rich, and maybe that was comforting. But it was the comfort of ignorance.

Jesus often tried to awaken His followers to the dangers of Fool's Goal. Some of us do not awaken easily. The comfort of ignorance sometimes seems more appealing than the reality of reordering our lives. Nevertheless, Jesus spoke of amassing wealth, storing up grain in barns, putting too much store in things that moth or rust or thieves could take away. Some people think that means we should get better mothballs, use more rust-resistant paint, and build safer banks. But that misses Jesus' point. *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."* (Luke 12:20-21)

Ending up in a Fool's Paradise comes from going after Fool's Goal. It leaves us bereft and empty. Of course, even real gold can be a Fool's Goal. Gathering gold for no purpose beyond itself is turning a resource into a goal – turning a means to an end, into an end in itself. It happens a lot. Like getting an education without any love for knowledge, spending years acquiring information without any intention of using it for some genuine benefit. What is the purpose of a postage stamp? To send messages to people – communication. But I knew a guy with a three-million-dollar stamp collection who hardly ever communicated anything to anybody.

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Why have a stamp if you do not want to mail a letter? Well, theoretically, you can turn it into gold. But why have gold? The world is full of Fool's Goal: desires that have no object; resources that have no purpose; potential that does not know there is anything to live for. *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

So all of us know that we are in danger – whenever we get careless – of going after Fool's Goal. And if we do that for very long, we end up in a Fool's Paradise. But I am particularly interested in our being aware, and staying aware, of such issues in this church. If this particular faith family does not stay awake and aware of such things, we will not be a church for very long. We want to support and help and walk with each other on the Christian WAY. That is not easy in our world. There are endless efforts to draw us off the Path, almost as if some Satan were trying to sell us Fool's Goal on purpose. I hope more and more of you believe it, and conduct yourselves accordingly.

So what is at stake? Every time I try to mention who we are and what we need to be about, some of you get nervous because such remarks could be interpreted as putting down other churches. I don't like that either. I try to keep it to a minimum. But our vision and purpose really do need to be better than those of many other churches. Just because some of them go after Fool's Goal does not mean we should also – just to keep friendly, or just to prove that we don't know the difference between love and tolerance. Anyway, I will try not to make a big deal out of that part of it, if you won't.

The biggest and most dangerous Fool's Goal in the American church today is the effort to improve the world and help others, without being changed ourselves. Every single time we participate in the church, join a committee, work on a project, try to engage in any deeds of love or compassion – if we think the purpose is to help others without our being changed, we are going after Fool's Goal. You know the attitude: *They* are the ones who need help. *They* are the ones who need to change. *They* are the ones who need God – who need to pray more – who need to be cleaned up, and educated, and taught to behave better.

Christianity is never about "they" and "them." It is always about "me" and "us." You can never improve the world in any way – no matter how large or small – unless you are willing to be changed yourself. The

very essence of Christianity is about being reborn, converted, transformed: remade in the image of Christ. Not them – us. When we forget about it for ourselves, we forget about it for others. Then we go into endless efforts that can only be called “Band-Aiding” – messing around on the surface without ever getting to what matters. Fool’s Goal! We think it glitters. We think it looks good. Anything that seems so nice and caring must be valuable. On closer examination, it flakes out and falls apart.

The twin sister of this first Fool’s Goal is the belief that we can improve the outside without improving the inside. Jesus tried again and again to warn us against this false goal. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity.”* (Matthew 23:25) *“And he called the people to him again, and said to them, ‘Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.’”* (Mark 7:14-15) *“The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”* (Luke 6:45) *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”* (Matthew 15:19-20) Yet more and more the church focuses on externals: How much? How many? What’s the body count? The society around us thinks in such terms. Therefore, we are always being asked questions from such a perspective. And if our answers don’t sound very good in our own ears, we start to get nervous or feel embarrassed. Do we care about being judged from a worldly perspective? Or do we care about pleasing our Lord?

More and more of you are helping to move this church into a very different stance and fellowship. I cannot say enough to thank you, or tell you how much and how deeply I appreciate it. But I can try to encourage it, and keep hoping that this direction will continue to get clearer and stronger among us – in every board and committee meeting; in every casual conversation, and in personal prayer; in every congregational meeting that makes decisions and sets direction; in all of our life together. We do not care how many people come here. We care about what happens to those who do. We are not trying to change the world. We are trying to live the Christian Life ourselves. We do not think Jesus is a good idea for others so that they will be nicer to us. We think Jesus is our own Lord and Savior. If sometimes we cannot help sharing Him with others who

seem like they would love to know Him, or like they know Him but do not have many other friends who do, that is understandable. But we try not to confuse the reality with what overflows from it. And while it is wonderful, and often inspiring, to see others changing, we want to be more faithful, more obedient, more loving *ourselves*. We also want to keep growing closer to God in Christ Jesus – the words are always inadequate, but we want more and more to worship, to praise, to know, to honor ... God.

Paul is talking to his Philippian friends along these same lines, if I hear him. He does not encourage them to go for the dazzle. He does not care if they are famous in the world. He wants them to go on in steady, faithful Christian Life and service.

There is a very big difference between being a *church* and being a weekend religious club. A strong weekend religious club can be pretty good, in a way. And lots of them have a few people at their core who are part of the church. But being the church is not the essence or purpose of the weekend religious clubs that dot our landscape. A weekend religious club is focused on its own programs, its success in the world, its image and reputation in the world. A *church* cares far more about the life of its people – where they work, where they live, and how they are doing as Jesus' disciples wherever they are, whatever they are doing.

The people of Jesus Christ are just as much the church on Monday and Tuesday (and every other day) as they are on Sunday. People who belong to a weekend religious club may bring some of the skills they learn on Monday and Tuesday – and some of the money they earn on Monday and Tuesday – to the club they attend on Sunday. But for many of them, Sunday is one thing, and life during the week is a very different matter. But Christians are at least as interested in living for Jesus during the week as they are in living for Him on Sunday. They try as hard to worship on Thursday as they do on Sunday. It may be a relief or a joy to be among Christian friends, to gain some refreshment and renew perspective, on Sunday. But the work of the church is not what our world calls “church work.” The work of the church is the people of Jesus Christ alive in the world. And no matter what they are engaged in, their aim (their purpose) is to be obedient and faithful to their Lord – at that very time, in that very activity and situation. Of course, they are aware that they constantly fall short of this goal. That is why they are always trying to grow and change. That is why they know it is necessary to pray every day, to keep reading the Bible, and to keep taking the bit out of their teeth and

turning back to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Only, the changing is wonderful, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is marvelous.

So you can go to a religious club. You can attend its performances. You can be part of the audience whenever you want. But you cannot *go* to church. Church is not about an audience; it is about a congregation – a faith family – a disciple band. You either *are* the church, or you have no concept of what church means: the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus – the body of Christ. And nobody, no outside force on earth, can keep you from being the church. No failure or disappointment or mistake can keep you from being the church. You can desert if you choose to. But that is the only way out. Just as accepting Jesus' love and mercy is the only way in.

We have a weekend religious club here at this address. But it is only a front. Some people love the club because it has been here a long time, they are used to it, and they have poured a lot of time and money and love into it. But most of you love the club because it is a front for the church, and you know some of what is going on behind the facade. We live in a physical world, and so the club is useful to us and helpful to some of our deeper purposes. But more and more of us need to know and remember that the club is here to serve the church – that the club has no purpose of its own except to serve the church – and that the church belongs to Jesus Christ.

A small illustration, though not unimportant: The club needs money to survive. It needs money to do most anything, like any other institution in this physical world. Now, suppose the club realizes that its West Room is in a shambles and needs painting and repairs and some new equipment. Or maybe it thinks it could accomplish more if it had an associate pastor. But let's stay with the West Room for the moment. So the club needs more money. We all know there are techniques, approaches, and methods that are perfectly legitimate in this world by which we can attempt to raise money. Moreover, if done well, they usually work – that is, they bring in money. Therefore, when the club needs more money, it will always loom as a possibility that we should “go raise the money.”

The problem is, if behind the religious club we are actually a church, then there is only one authentic way to raise money. And that is to raise the congregation's level of faith – their love for Jesus – their awareness of why the church exists and how important it really is. Then they will give because it is the life they live, the thing they want to do, an act of devotion and allegiance to God. That is authentic stewardship, and it

truly builds the life and mission of the church. But if the money comes not out of love and allegiance to Jesus, but out of pressure and manipulation from the outer world, then the West Room may look fantastic, but we have gone against our real reason for being here: the soul growth of our people. We tried to take a shortcut. We tried to get it before we wanted it for the right reason. In the long run, we cannot win that way. We can rationalize and hope that the West Room will now be useful to meetings and programs that will bring soul growth. But we have already proved that we are not patient enough to trust and build our life around what we really believe to be important. So it will never become truly important among us. Whenever there is a need or an issue, we will revert to the ways of the world instead of staying faithful to the ways of our Lord. So our people will never learn to give because they belong to Jesus and wish to serve Him. They will only give when they feel the pressure of the world and decide to respond to the world's motives.

A second illustration is too close on the heels of the first not to mention. I can tell you these things – say these things – and mean them with all of my heart. And I can try my best to influence the decisions of this church to match this WAY of Life. But if you do not see it yourselves and choose it as a congregation because you believe it too, then I have accomplished nothing. Isn't that right? Getting my way – even getting the majority vote – doesn't mean a thing unless it truly reflects your minds and hearts too. Until our hearts change, all outside behavior – no matter how correct – is only a temporary fix. It will revert back to the old ways very quickly.

And now I remind you: While I think about such matters all the time in relationship to our religious club, it is your task to think about such principles and choices all the time in relationship to your work in the outer world. I have it easier – I can at least appeal to our Way in Christ Jesus. Most of you cannot do that where you work. Nevertheless, you are the church no matter where you go. And though you have to be discerning about when and where you use the language of the church, nevertheless it is your life to carry the Spirit of our Lord into every place you go, and into everything you do. We are never willing to promote success at the expense of the LIFE we believe in and try to live.

So, if we imagine some well-fed, well-clothed person living in a lovely house, but they have no character, no vision – if they have no stamina and cannot keep a promise; if they blow about with every wind, opinion,

and desire that comes down the road; if they will betray any precept or person if it seems to them convenient or might get them what they think they want – can such a person be what the church is trying to produce and encourage? Yet many religious clubs operate as if this were just fine. Fix the body, never mind the soul. A great many of our programs to help people are designed as if this were a perfectly legitimate and desirable outcome. Fix the body, never mind the soul.

To be sure, the invitations to real LIFE all come from God. God is Creator – Author – and all true authority comes from God. Mercy and grace ... love and life ... forgiveness and purpose – it all depends upon God, and God must lead the Way and give these things to us first, or we have no chance to discover any of it.

But in the end, Heaven depends upon us. That is, Heaven is a community, and it is made up of individuals. The quality of Life there – no matter how high and beautiful the dimensions, no matter how much potential God has built into it – the quality of Life there depends upon the character and spirit of those who live there.

Grace lets us grow and change and learn from where we are. Forgiveness keeps giving us new chances. But we cannot escape it, can we? Inevitably and indubitably, Heaven and the quality of Life there will depend upon who we really are on the inside: on how much we truly love the good; on how authentically we are faithful and obedient to our Lord; on how much we are willing to risk giving ourselves and all the gifts and abilities we have been blessed with.

Will we truly love each other and go on appreciating the value and worth of each other, overlooking the remaining flaws, while we continue to grow, and change, and learn eternally? Ah yes, Life is bigger than we think. For in Heaven, we pick up from where we left off here. And eternity has possibilities and dimensions we cannot yet imagine.

If the hope of the Christian Life is real, then it is ludicrous to believe that life here is most important for the ways we are adjusting and manipulating the outside: the houses; the hairdos; the property and possessions; the titles and prominence. All of it has its place. And it is, after all, the only training ground we have at the moment in which to train our souls. So the way we deal with the outside is always showing us how we are really doing on the inside. But thinking the outside is the reality – the true aim and purpose – means the soul goes dormant and stops

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developing. When we track Jesus' approaches, His thought-life, His methods and teachings, the way He dealt with individuals – it all points to this same reality: God in Christ Jesus cares about the children awakening to their true inner selves – and starting the long pilgrimage toward authentic love and LIFE that well-up from within. And Jesus kept saying and showing that we must not waver from this goal, no matter how much pressure and mayhem this world brings against us, or how strongly Satan tries to tempt us to turn aside or go after lesser goals.

When we deal with other people and when we deal with ourselves, we are dealing with God's children – children of eternity. In the long run, the rules do not matter. They are only hints to get us started. In the long run, it depends on what comes from the heart – from within – from who we have truly become. It is almost impossible to keep remembering this. It is absolutely imperative that we keep remembering this. Otherwise we turn off our pilgrimage, and turn aside from the Christian Path and Way.

It is Fool's Goal to make any *thing* in this world our true priority, our highest goal, our reason for living. The inner being – the character, the soul – is what matters. We are after true wisdom – authentic love – motives and choices that come from within and honor what we really care about. We want life and behavior, attitudes and actions that are truly in line with Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Otherwise, when we get to Heaven, we will ruin it – and shortly find ourselves in a place no better than this one. Or maybe you think the fundamentalists are right: that God cannot afford to let us into Heaven in the first place, unless we get perfect here. I know that means there is no room for me. Besides, how do you get *perfect* here, for a realm as vast as eternity?