

Striving to be Better

We climb the ladder to success, but is it leaning against the right building?

It seems a natural thing to strive to want to be better. But who has the right version of what it means to be ‘better’, and how do you know when you’ve finally arrived at the ‘better’ you are trying to achieve? Whatever it is, we certainly spend a lot of time and energy chasing after it. This study scratches the surface on what we are aiming for in life and how that matches with the expectations of society and the expectations of God.



Things to do/ Questions to consider

To begin...

Consider the box on the right. It contains a list of some of the different segments of life.

- Rank the areas listed in the box according to how you think mainstream society as a whole would rank them, from 1 (most important) down to 12 (not as important).
- Do you think most people feel they have achieved their aims in these areas or do you think they believe they still have some way to go?
- For you personally, rank the areas listed in the box from 1 to 12. Have you ‘arrived’ at where you want to get to in any of these areas? For the other areas, how close are you... 30%, 50%, 80%? You don’t have to share your thoughts on this.
- Compared to people in mainstream society, do you think are you more likely or less likely to feel like you’ve achieved your aims (regardless of what the aims are)?

Education	Location	Housing
Employment	Income level	Faith experience
Friendships	Health/fitness	Community involvement
Relationship status (single, couple, married, with children,...)	Bucket list experiences (eg travel, climb a mountain,...)	Other? (eg latest technology, clothes, car...)

1. Paul the over-achiever

In a letter to the believers in Philippi, the Apostle Paul wrote about a significant change in the way he understood and valued things. In the past, according to what was of value in the Jewish world he had lived in, Paul was at the ‘top of his game’. But when he met Christ everything changed for him.

Read Philippians 3:4-16 (see text box over the page)

In verses 4-6, Paul describes what made him such a model citizen:

- **Heritage** (born a Jew and clearly able to trace his lineage)
- **Education** (completed his training and qualification as a Pharisee)
- **Ability** (consistently able to live according to the requirement of Jewish laws)
- **Drive** (zealously persecuted Christians, showing his initiative and dedication)

- As you think about our society, what sort of *heritage, education, ability, and drive (or characteristics)* might make someone highly valued?
- Do you think you are highly valued according to the standards of our society?

2. Finding a new 'better'

In verses 7-9, Paul describes his new way of seeing things following his encounter with Jesus. Re-read verses 7-9.

- What must Paul have seen or experienced for him to come to the conclusion that everything he had achieved up to that point was 'garbage'? How does someone make such a dramatic change in values like this?
- For someone at the 'bottom of the heap', this is good news: you are highly valued because of what Jesus has done for you, not because of any (lack of) merit or assets you have. But if you are already highly valued by society, does it mean you have something to lose? How can this also be good news for these people?
- What are some of the things people do just because they believe these things will make them more valuable in the eyes of society? What can help you identify when you also do these things with this wrong motive?

3. Striving for a new 'better'

In verses 10-16, Paul talks about not having completely 'arrived' in his experience with God. Rather, he 'presses on' and 'strains toward' it.

- How does Paul's idea of working hard match with his idea of being acceptable to God just on the basis of faith?
- Practically speaking, what might it look like for you to work hard in your life with God while also walking by faith?

Philippians 3:4-16

...If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh (ie 'in myself'), I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. 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. ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

Philippians 3:4-16

Thought to finish

Paul had a formidable CV. He was a rising star amongst his generation in his society. But his encounter with Christ changed all that. What he previously thought to be major personal assets, he now recognised as irrelevant. When he met Jesus he experienced a new life and a different way of seeing things – he saw how *God* saw things. His identity and value system turned on its head. For Paul – as for us – heritage, education, ability and drive may be valued by society, but they add nothing to our identity or worth before God. There is genuine merit in striving to be better, but it's a striving to become a more *fully human* version of us – a version that is already loved and accepted by God because of Jesus. Our efforts are just to 'live up to what we have already attained'.