

The Sin of Aiming Low

Colossians 3:1-4

Sermon by Don Emmitte, Grace Restoration Ministries

George Bernard Shaw said: "People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, they make them!" Jesus said it differently in Mark 9:23, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." (Mark 9:23 ESV). Paul uses a different image.

Take Your Bibles, Please...

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4 ESV).

So, if this is true, it is not failure that is a sin; but, aiming low that is the sin! And the greater sin is to have no aim, no purpose, no goals, no direction in life. "All things are possible," Christ promised us. George Bernard Shaw, not a religious man but certainly a practical man, was right. It is not circumstances that make the difference in life. It is what is in your heart, your determination, and goals that determine your life's path.

This is the great impact of our text today. The opening verses of Chapter 3 are closely connected with the closing verses of Chapter 2. There Paul uses negative argument, here the positive side is presented. Paul strongly states the only remedy for sinful passions is found in the believer's experience of union with Christ - this union being the root principle of the whole Christian life. Where you are, and what is happening around you is not the determining factor of life ...for the Christian, Christ is the determining factor!

Let's look at the story of Shamgar, an ordinary man and his remarkable achievement against insurmountable odds. He lived in Israel about 1250 B.C. He was a farmer. He was not of great estate, training, and learning. He lived amid the direst of circumstances. The Philistines had conquered Israel and subjected the people to severe oppression. They had confiscated all their swords, spears, and shields. They had deported all the blacksmiths so they could make no new implements of war. When the farmers tried to raise a crop, the Philistines would swoop down upon them as they were threshing the grain, and rob them of all their food. The people were driven into the cities where they cowered in fear behind the stone walls. The roads of commerce were grown over because no one dared to travel them. The people lived in despair and fear every day of their lives.

Shamgar, too, must have lived behind the protective walls of the city – afraid to go out to his fields to plant his crops. His children tugged at his coattail crying for bread. Finally, Shamgar said: "It is enough. I will take my stand as a man! I have faith in God. I believe God helps those who help themselves. If I continue to sit behind these walls, we will certainly die of starvation. So, I am going to plant my crops and try to raise some food for my family. The Philistines may kill me but I would rather die trying to do something than to die sitting here doing nothing about my bad circumstances."

So Shamgar set a goal, and planned what he would do, step by step. He started one morning with his team of oxen and plowed his field. No Philistines! Then he sowed the field. No Philistines! And, then he cultivated the crops and brought the grain to the threshing floor. Sounds simple doesn't it.

Then one morning as he was driving his oxen round and round on the threshing floor, treading out the grain, the Philistines came rolling down over the hill, 600 strong armed soldiers to confiscate his grain, and kill him if he resisted. Well, the line was drawn - the time for decision had come. Shamgar had to decide for himself what he would do with his life. He could blame circumstances. He could have said: "600 armed soldiers! And I am alone and not even a soldier! They have the weapons of war and I have nothing - no sword, no shield, no spear! Lord, I will wait for better circumstances and better odds when I have some reinforcements and when I am prepared!"

All of us reach points in our lives when we must make decisions. Everyone is ultimately responsible for those decisions that shape our lives. One day each of us will stand before God and give account of ourselves and what we have done with what he has given us. This is the truth of the parable of the talents. How many times I have heard prison inmates talk about their terrible home lives, the lack of available counseling, the sense of loss and failure they have experienced in life, and heard them say: "If? If it had been different I wouldn't have turned out like this!"

That is wrong! It simply is not so. Oh, indeed, these people may have some psychological problems, but none of them nor us can say the reason for the way our lives have turned out is because of somebody else. Neither circumstance, nor parents, nor family, nor environment made you. You chose, and you will give an account of those choices. Shamgar had a choice. He could turn tail and run for his life and save his skin. Or he could say: "I don't know how I will do it, Lord, but I will stand like a man for you." And he did.

The only weapon he had was an ox goad. I have seen an ox goad in the Middle East. It is an oak sapling, peeled of bark, eight or ten feet long. On one end is a sharp metal spike with which they poke the slow-moving and stubborn oxen. The other end is a flat hoe-like piece of metal used to scrape the dirt from the plow. That is all Shamgar had. But, you see, it was Shamgar, plus an ox-goad, plus God! What a formula! A little boy and a small lunch of loaves and with Jesus and 5000 hungry people is the same story. It is the same God and the same miracle! There it is!

When the Philistines made contact with Shamgar they thought they had turned over a hive of bees! He began to swing that ox goad, cracking skulls here and there - punching, jabbing, hurling, weaving - and when it was all over, 600 of the Philistines were laid out. He had killed them all. He stood victorious over them all. *Judges 3:31 tells the end of the story simply: After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed 600 of the Philistines with an oxgoad, and he also saved Israel.*

You see, it is not so much the instrument in the hand, it is the heart that moves the hand - and it is the God behind the heart that moves the hand that holds the instrument! That is what counts. And we have this beautiful epitaph: "And they made him judge" - third judge of Israel - "and he also delivered Israel and made them free."

Let me help you tie Shamgar and what Paul says in our text today together. Let me ask you some questions and make some suggestions for your life to be successful. What are your purposes in life? What are your goals? What are you "aiming at" with your life? Do you have some goal, some aim - and is it high enough? Is it worthy of the opportunity God has given? Is it?

The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years and died there. They wandered aimlessly. They wavered between going on to the promised land or going back to Egypt. For a whole generation they said, "We are really not going anywhere. We will just wander on a little further down the road." **How many of us today feel like the children of Israel? We have been wandering around aimlessly a long time.** Some of you may be thinking, "Yes, I have been wandering in the wilderness 40 years in an aimless purposeless life." "I really have no real goal in life!" That is like a man playing baseball - he is in uniform, with mitt in hand, wandering around on the field all during the game. He wanders to second base, to the field, to home base! Finally, in the last of the ninth inning he suddenly wakes up and discovers what the game is all about!

There are four things involved in this principle of setting your affection on things above. Listen to them.

First, We Must Visualize (v. 2).

First of all, "visualize," from the word vision, from the word seeing, from the word looking. I must look and see and visualize my goal. **Paul say: "Set your eyes - your vision - where Christ is!"** Look up!

- ✚ *I know people who look in all directions of life. Some people look backwards in life and see only what is behind them.* I once saw a circus clown ride a bicycle backwards. He got on it backwards and guided it backwards and pedaled backwards. It was ludicrous! But I know lots of people who are riding the bicycle of life backwards. They are looking back at their mistakes - blunders – bitterness and wrongs of yesterday. Others look backwards to the grand old days of yesterday that are long since gone and faded. Their future is always behind them because they are always looking backwards to their yesterdays.
- ✚ *I also know others whose vision is only outward.* They claim to be "realists" while looking only at the facts and circumstances of the present situation. The friends of Shamgar, cowering in the walled city, could see only Philistines, trouble, hardship, and desolation. Let us not be deceived. Life does have its problems. It is a tough world, full of Philistines who are out to kill you. The devil is loose and his demons of evil pursue you like a "roaring lion." Life is hard when all we can see are the Philistines.
- ✚ *Then, there are others who only look downward.* Most school children learn a little couplet: "Two men looked out through prison bars; one saw mud, the other, stars." Same circumstance. One looked down with five-foot vision and saw mud. The other looked up, a million miles, and saw the heavens full of light and stars. When we only look down, we walk through life defeated, discouraged, depressed. **Paul says, "Set your affection, your aim, where Christ is."** Look up to see what God wants you to be - what he wants you to do with your life. Set goals, dreams and ambitions that are God-honoring, Christ-fulfilling, spiritually enriching goals.

We must ask how will these goals make us a better Christian? How will these goals enrich our Christian testimony, build the church and win people to Christ? When we look up where Christ is, our goals are glorified by God and bathed by his spirit! Visualize!

Second, We Need to Concretize.

Then the second step is 'to concretize.' It is a good word from the word concrete. Put the dream in concrete. Articulate it - express it - write it down. Get it in concrete. Motivational speakers talk about finding direction and purpose in life, and all consistently say that goals make the difference! But, you do not really have a goal unless you write it down – unless you articulate it - put it in the concrete. Then these goals must be broken down into long range goals, and short range goals, step-by-step goals and deadlines to achieve these goals. That is goal-setting!

That is exactly what Shamgar did. He said: "My goal is to raise some food for my family. Step one is to plow. Step two is to plant. Next step is to cultivate. And I work toward the deadline of the August harvest when I can bring home some food for my children. Do you have some tangible written goals for your life, for yourself, for your family? Are they concretized?"

Some years ago, in a revival at the Union Avenue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, there was a man who was building a dream of an international franchise system of motels. He said that when he married, he and his wife wrote down the goals they had in life - for their marriage – their business - their church. And every night they would get on their knees and pray about these goals. And Wallace Johnson, founder of Holiday Inns, said: "God has changed those goals and refined them through the years. We all have our goals. I have them in my pocket right now – my wife and I will read them and then pray tonight asking God to continue to refine these goals and give us the power to achieve these goals!" This is concretizing your goals. Concretize.

Third, We Need to Energize.

The third step is to energize your goals. Paul says: "Set your affection – that is your heart ..." It is a matter of the heart. Fall in love with your goals until you are consumed by a burning desire to achieve these goals. Wrap yourself around your' goals and let them wrap themselves around you and consume you.

Martha Berry, founder of the Berry schools of Georgia for mountain boys and girls, was asked, "When you die and go to heaven, what are you going to do then?" She said: "I am going to walk right up to St. Peter and say, 'St. Peter, where are all the cast-off golden crowns and worn out silver stars? Give them to me!' Then I will melt all the golden crowns and silver stars down and send it to my school in Georgia to educate some more boys and girls." Miss Berry was saying, "My goal in life is so all-consuming that I hope, even in death, I can keep on achieving this goal." She was consumed by it.

When you are consumed by this kind of a burning passion to achieve a worthy God honoring ministering goal, God will bless you! Paul said: "This one thing I do - one thing! I found God's purpose in my life and I am giving myself to it." So energize your goal.

Fourth, We Need to Realize Our Goal.

Then, realize your goal, the last step. There are three parts to this task.

- ✚ **First, it takes determination.** Julius Ceasar, a great statesman and a great general, said, "More battles are won by determination by far than by genius." Shamgar had to stick with it, plowing, planting, cultivating, before he would ever hope for a harvest.
- ✚ **Second, it will take work - hard, grinding, dedicated, devoted work!** It will demand all your energies. Shamgar had to fight like a wild man to defeat 600 armed Philistines with only an ox goad!
- ✚ **Third, it takes starting.** We can't wait for a more opportune time. Shamgar could have said: "Lord, this is no time to take a stand against the Philistines with odds 600 to one! I will wait for better circumstances, more reinforcements and weapons!"

Remember, life does not give us an opportune time. But life does give us today! Therefore, "Today is the time to act!" If we start today, and put one foot in front of the other, and start walking - I do not care how far away that goal is in the future - sooner or later, if we walk long enough we will eventually arrive at our destination. A second truth is also certain - if you do not take that first step and start walking, you will never get there.

The Bible says: "Today is the day of salvation!" "Now is the accepted time." Today! Not tomorrow! Realize YOUR dream this day. Get going for God today!

What does all of this mean to you? For Sharmar it meant picking up that ox goad and taking his stand! For you, it may mean picking up your church membership and putting it to work for God! It may mean taking a stand for Christ and right - no matter the cost. You know what you should've done long ago - now take your first step! Don't wait for a more convenient time, get moving for the Lord now, today!

Let us pray...