



# *Is Your Spiritual Goal All Wrong?*

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## **Goals**

Goals are an intrinsic part of life. They help set priorities, provide focus and improve motivation in achieving something considered to be important. Goals are born of desire and a vision for the future. We want to obtain something, achieve something or be something so we set our sights on it. Some goals are so important one might even make sacrifices to obtain it.

I remember the day I started high school. I was already envisioning myself getting into a top-notch college. I knew high school grades would have a tremendous impact on this desired reality, so I set a goal to graduate with as close to a perfect grade point average as I could.

Now that I had a goal, I needed a plan. I would pay attention in class and take lots of notes. I would read every word in the textbooks and create sample tests for myself. All homework would be completed and turned in on time. If necessary, I would sacrifice some fun and game time to make sure my school work was completed. At the end of that first year, I was well on target. Three more years and I would be attending the college of my dreams.

Things continued to go well the following year until the end of the first semester. I had a scheduling conflict with a French mid-term exam. No problem, I'll ask the teacher if I can take the test in the morning class instead of the afternoon class. For reasons that made no sense to me, the answer was "no". Rebellion ensued. I decided to skip class on test day and show up the following day claiming I wasn't feeling well. My scheme didn't work. The teacher didn't accept my absence and failed me for the test. Being a mid-term exam, the failing grade went directly onto my next report card and with horror I waved goodbye to my dreams. More rebellion ensued.

I decided school was unfair and no longer worth my effort. I set a new goal to keep my grades just good enough to get into a better than average college. I would put forth the least effort possible to still achieve this new goal. For example...When given an assignment to read and write a book report on *A Tale of Two Cities*, I shunned the reading of 400-plus pages. I wrote my report based only on the CliffsNotes and didn't even care about the poor grade I got on that report. Three years later, I had achieved this easier goal and was accepted into pretty good college. Achieving the goal felt kind of empty though.

I could write a book about my high school years. I would probably call it *A Tale of Two Goals*. One goal was exciting and inspired me to do my best. Nothing got in my way and I was willing to make sacrifices for it. The other goal was easy. Setting the bar so low only left me with bad attitudes, bad habits and a bad work ethic. I never reached my full potential in high school, but it didn't even matter to me.

## **Spiritual goals**

The idea of having an ultimate spiritual goal may seem strange at first; but anything we desire and put effort into might be called a goal. For those who don't like the word "goal" in a spiritual context, just call it desire, aim or purpose. Whatever one wants to call it, having the wrong spiritual goal can cause problems in the spiritual life.

One who considers themselves to be a Christian has to have a vision for the eternal future. Why God? Why Jesus? The simple answer is one believes there is another life after this one. That next life has two possible outcomes and one of them is not good. If one desires the better eternal fate, it means becoming a Christian. Once one decides to be a Christian, they have to decide how they are going to go about being a Christian. This is where the wrong goal causes problems.

As I learned from having two different goals in high school, the ultimate goal we set directly affects the attitudes and effort we put forth into the goal. Maybe I should rename this article to [A Tale of Two Spiritual Goals](#).



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## **Salvation as the goal**

As a child, I often thought of God like Santa Claus. God had his naughty and nice lists and I wanted to be sure I was on the nice list. I put in a lot of effort into being nice to people, being obedient to parents, going to church and so on. I wanted salvation and to go to Heaven. The concept of naughty and nice lists is a great motivator to be good. But the problem with the naughty/nice concept of salvation is one is always wondering if they are nice enough. I'd hate to have my eternal life derailed because I was one check mark short in the nice column.

On a couple of occasions I've been asked by some Protestants if I knew for sure I was going to Heaven. They were happy to assure me "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10). They explained that when I stand before God in my sinful state being accused by the devil, Jesus will step in and "take one for the team" so I can get off scot-free. This sounds very appealing and takes all the pressure off. Goodness, I wish my high school goal of perfect grades was that easy. Just show up for class and say "good morning teacher". If I fail a test somebody else will take the failing grade for me so I can get the perfect grade. Awesome!

Maybe I'm just an over-achiever. Maybe my old ways of earning salvation are coming back to haunt me. But, to me, a Christian who believes salvation is achieved simply by saying "Lord, Lord" is like a student with the goal of being just good enough to pass. Once one decides their ticket to Heaven is already punched by Jesus, there can be a temptation to pick and choose what effort is put into the spiritual life.

God commands us to keep holy the sabbath (Exodus 20:8). Some go to church, but others don't and still claim they are saved. They have decided Mass is unnecessary because "God is in my heart" or "I can worship God anywhere". Scripture also tells us those with immorality, impurity, hatred, jealousy, selfishness and drunkenness will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5:17-21). Yet some live with these sins, have no intent of repentance and still claim they are saved. Does God really allow those who believe He exists to make up their own rules?

Salvation as a spiritual goal is an enigma. One would think there is only one way to salvation. Christians all believe the one way is Jesus, but that is where the agreement ends. Christians can't agree if salvation is by "faith alone" or if "faith without works is dead". Believers argue whether going to church is necessary and what church has the right salvation message. Christians decide for themselves if all sin is wiped away, if confession is necessary, if repentance is necessary and so on. Some believe Heaven is waiting for all who say "Lord, Lord" regardless of sin in their life. Others say unrepented sin must be purified after death before one can enter Heaven.

This is where salvation as a spiritual goal is totally off base. Christians claim and preach salvation. They all worship the same God, but can't even agree on the conditions and meaning of salvation. Personal interpretations and self-proclaimed divine revelations lead many Christians to believe salvation is whatever they decide, not what God has decided.

It is said that Gandhi was asked why he wasn't Christian. Reportedly, his response was twofold. "I don't want forgiveness of sins, I want to stop sinning." Wow! Good point. The focus on salvation alone and complete forgiveness of sins has led many Christians to keep on sinning without any regret. This leads to Gandhi's second response of "I like Christianity. I would become Christian if it were not for Christians." The Church tells us "Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion" (Catholic Catechism, 2125).



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Many like to think they preach salvation to others by their words. Yet, their very actions undermine their preaching and give them no credibility. They talk about God, yet live day to day and treat others as though there was no God. As Paul writes, “They claim to know God, but by their deeds they deny him” (Titus 1:16). What might God’s response be on judgment day for one who proclaimed “Lord, Lord” yet denied God by their very actions?

Salvation is not the right spiritual goal nor the right spiritual message to non-believers. Salvation might entice those who want to avoid eternal fire to turn to Jesus; but where does that leave them? It is like the parent who threatens a child with punishment if they don’t clean their room. The child will grudgingly comply only to avoid punishment. It won’t be long before the room is messy again because the child has no commitment to a clean room. There has to be a better goal than salvation alone.

### **Union with Jesus as the goal**

“Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection” (Romans 6:3,5). In this verse, Paul mentions being united to Christ two times; once in His death and once in His resurrection.

“The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Wages are the just payment earned when one performs a service for someone. Death is the wage, the just payment, earned when one offends God through sin. Jesus was sinless, yet took upon Himself the death we earned by sin. Thus, we live. This is the basic salvation message. But the message cannot stop here, otherwise one might just thank God for opening up Heaven and let sin continue to reign in their life.

“We have grown into union with Him through a death like His” (Romans 6:5). On the cross, the human nature of Jesus was put to death. Growing into union with Jesus through a death like His doesn’t mean we literally or physically die on a cross. What it does mean, however, is our human nature is crucified and put to death as was the human nature of Jesus.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). “You too must think of yourself as dead to sin” (Romans 6:12). When we are united to Jesus in His death, we crucify the human nature in us that desires to sin. It doesn’t mean we all of a sudden stop sinning. Paul even wrote “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Romans 7:19).

The entire key to being united with Jesus in death on the cross is putting sin to death. It is losing the desire to sin. It is stopping the habit of self-justification of sin by convincing oneself the sin didn’t hurt anyone or the act isn’t really a sin anyway. When one is in union with Jesus on the cross, they feel the pain of sin Jesus felt as He was dying for their sins. This is not a remorseful or self-judgmental feeling. Rather, it is to say one seeks even more graces to stop sinning. Jesus spent three hours dying on the cross. We may spend a lifetime dying to sin and our human nature. But the human nature must die.

“We shall also be united with him in the resurrection” (Romans 6:3,5). The resurrection of Jesus was the reuniting of His soul with His body. This was not the Ascension, where Jesus was raised to Heaven. This was Jesus once again physically walking the earth as a new man. Our resurrection is also not about being raised to Heaven. It is being raised to a new life on earth, dedicated to God and being united to Him. It is a life focused on today, not on Heaven and not on the end of the world. Rather, it is living the abundant life of Christ and bringing His light to every person every day while we still walk on this earth.

Being united to Jesus in His resurrection, we are of one mind with Him and one purpose with Him. Our thoughts are His thoughts, our words are His words and our actions are His actions. We “put on the new self, which is being



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renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10). And just like being united to Christ in His death, this is not a flip of a switch. It is a renewal, a transformation; which can be fast or slow depending on how much we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. "All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (Catechism, 2013). Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ (Catechism, 2014).

Our one true and only spiritual goal should be complete union with Jesus in both His cross and His resurrection. Only then can we become a light to the world. Only then can our witness and words bring others to the salvation of Jesus. Then the Father will say "Well done, my good and faithful servant...Come, share your master's joy" (Matthew 25:21).

### **A note on unity**

"I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:20-21). Jesus prayed for unity for both His disciples and also all who believe in Him in the future.

There are currently over 45,000 Christian denominations in the world. This doesn't even include those who call themselves Catholic but in fact aren't really Catholic because they can't bring themselves to faithfully follow all the teachings of the Church. There is one God and God is one (Mark 12:29). One God should be the source of one truth and one way, not 45,000 ways.

It is the focus on salvation alone that has led to such division. Every salvation message has elements of truth that cannot be denied. Salvation is by faith, even the Catholic Church teaches this. But false teachers twist and leave out parts of the message they don't like, similar to Martin Luther five hundred years ago. Then as Paul prophesied, "The time will come when men will not tolerate sound doctrine, but with itching ears they will gather around themselves teachers to suit their own desires" (2 Timothy 4:3).

If one wants to believe they can continue in sin and enter Heaven immediately upon death, simply claim faith alone and deny the doctrine of Purgatory. It's that easy to justify one's self. But this is pride and self-idolatry. It is the "I Religion" that says "I alone determine what is true. I follow only what I say is truth." This is very similar to the sin of the devil, who said "I will not serve."

If Christians would set their hearts on being united to Jesus in His death and in His resurrection, the one truth would become known by all. "The Spirit of truth will guide people into all truth" (John 16:13). Christianity could be united again if everyone would follow the Church and the Holy Spirit rather than their own desires and what they want to believe is the Holy Spirit.