

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

FORGET THE PAST

I want us to focus on those last few key sentences. “This one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal.”

After a time of great emotional upheaval we talk about people learning to “move on with their life.” In other words there must come a time when we focus on new goals. There comes a time when we look forward instead of looking back.

Those of you who play sports know the importance of this principle. If you are to be a good competitor, you cannot let the losses or the wins of the past influence how you play today.

Each day and each new game is a challenge. Just ask the Boston Red Sox or the Atlanta Braves about the importance of staying in the moment and keeping your eye on the prize.

As most of you know I play golf with your organist. It’s a great diversion, but sometimes our shots go astray and the squirrels are in great danger! And quite often the golf shots we play after that first stray shot are also not so good either. Why is that?

Well, one reason is that we only play golf once a week at the most. But, the other reason is that we allow that last bad shot to influence our next shot. We cannot forget the recent past. We overcompensate by changing our grip or swinging faster or slower. The results are not pretty.

And the results will continue to be bad until we forget the last shot and focus on the shot that we are playing. And I think that is the key to successful living. We have to learn to forget the past and focus on what we need to do today.

But, how do we do that? The past has a strong influence on present behavior. If we sliced that last shot into the woods we will be afraid that it will happen again. And that's what we visualize.

Even our good memories can have a bad effect on what we do today.

Let me take you back to the golf course. Sometimes if I hit a good shot by using a certain technique or thought process, I will apply that way of doing things to the next shot. But, the next shot may not require that technique or I may overdo the instruction that made the last shot a good one.

Can you guess what happens next? That's right. The squirrels are in danger again!

You may not play golf, but I bet in your own way you have hit your fair share of balls into the woods. You've made mistakes because you worried about the last mistake, and you have made mistakes because you were not focused on what is required to do the job today.

The Apostle Paul was the same way.

SAUL'S MISTAKE

Before Paul became a Christian he was known as Saul. And Saul had learned his lessons well. He was what you might call a Jew's Jew. He was dedicated to preserving the religious tradition of his people. He was dedicated to being kosher in every respect.

And that dedication to God's Word was admirable. We are a people who need to know where we have been in order to know where we are going.

But, his dedication to the past produced a blind spot in the present. Instead of doing God's will and helping God's people, Paul persecuted the church. Paul in his desire to do God's will ironically was doing just the opposite.

Faith for Paul was just a matter of preserving the past. But, God wanted him to focus on more than the past. God wanted Paul to focus on the present and the future.

What happened to Paul can also happen to us today. Dedicated people sometimes focus only on the past and are not open to what God may be doing today and in the future.

That's why such terrible things have been done down through the years in the name of faith. Faith that is focused totally upon what God has done in the past can blind us instead of opening our eyes. We turn the dynamic stories of God's salvation into rules and regulations that must be followed precisely.

And like the golfer who is too worried about getting everything just right, we slice our next shot into the woods. We fail because we are not focused on the right thing.

GOAL ORIENTED

I've gone for several golf lessons in my life. They've all helped ... for a while. But, the first part of the lesson is always the same. I've overdone my past lessons and now I have a lot of bad habits.

So, the instructor first has to get rid of those bad habits. The instructor has to "take out the garbage" in my swing so to speak.

Notice that Paul had to do the same thing in his own life. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians that before he could follow Jesus he had to take the trash out of his life. He had to realize that all the accomplishments and all the failures of the past were not important any more.

He had to focus like a laser on one thing. And what was that one thing?

That one thing was "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." This is our target. This is our goal. This is what we need to be focused upon.

It's amazing how when we are focused upon a goal everything else is not as important. Once again let's return to the golf course. If I focus on the goal, hitting the ball to a target, and forget everything else, it's amazing how many times I can do it. If I'm not so worried about what I'm doing but where I need to go, I am often more successful.

The same is true in the work world. If I have a project to do and I stay focused on that project, I'm not worried about how many hours I'm working or the latest office gossip. The goal of completing that project helps me focus and move forward.

And the same thing is true for those of us who would follow Jesus. We need to be target oriented, and that target is "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

THE CALL OF HEAVEN

Heaven is indeed the goal for the Christian, but heaven is not a static goal. Heaven is more than just saying that one day when we die we will go to heaven. Heaven is according to Paul a calling. In other words the goal of heaven animates our actions today.

Let me give you an example of how heaven works for the follower of Christ. I did an internship on the coast of North Carolina. And for exercise sometimes I would run on the beach. Now whenever I ran, I always had a goal. I ran toward the pier in the distance.

Some of you know that on the beach distances are a little deceptive. That large pier in the distance may look close, but in reality it may be very far away. But, I found that if I kept my eyes on that pier, that goal I could run farther and faster.

My thought process went something like this, “Just keep running Frank. That pier in the distance is getting closer. Just keep you eyes on the prize.”

And most of the time I made it to my goal. It felt good.

But, sometimes I would make the mistake of looking back to see how far I had come. When I saw all the ground I would have to cover in order to make it back to my car, I became discouraged. And I would say, “I’ve gone far enough for today. Maybe tomorrow I’ll make it to the pier.”

And then I would turn around and walk back without reaching my goal.

You might say that Christianity is a target-oriented game. And our target, what calls us upward and onward; the thing that encourages us to press on toward the mark is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Notice how Paul almost makes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus sound like something that we do as well as something that we know and accept.

Paul wants to know Jesus by “becoming like him in his death” and “somehow attaining resurrection from the dead.”

In other words the goal of heaven is not pie in the sky by and by kind of goal. Heaven is defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is a heaven that does not promote quietly waiting for the second coming. It is a heaven that motivates and animates what we do here and now.

THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

Heaven, the kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus is our target. He is the goal. Jesus is indeed the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by him.

But, we need to remember that when we say that, when we say that Jesus is the way, we are not allowed to just use the name of Jesus and then just do any old thing. When we say that Jesus is the way that means we use the way of Jesus to motivate and animate our lives.

The way of Jesus is the way of peace. “Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you.”

The way of Jesus is the way of justice. “Blessed are the poor and the poor in spirit.”

The way of Jesus is the way of compassion. “Blessed are those who mourn.”

The way of Jesus is the way of personal morality and responsibility. He forgives us and tells us, “Go and sin no more.”

When it comes to the way of Jesus we all take our eyes off the goal in one way or another. We overemphasize the benefits of following Jesus without also acknowledging that He calls his disciples to “take up a cross.” We overemphasize the importance of personal morality without also acknowledging the call to promote “social justice.”

When my golf game gets really bad, I go to see an instructor. He reminds me of the basics. He helps me see how I am overemphasizing one aspect of my game to the detriment of another part of game. A good instructor keeps it simple and gets me back on track.

The frustrating and at the same time fascinating thing about golf is that you never get it completely. From the lowly duffer to the best touring pro there is always more to learn.

In a greater way the same is true about those of us who strive to be a follower of Jesus. There is always more to learn. Just when we think we’ve “got it” we start looking back instead of forward. We focus on our fears instead of our faith. We take our eyes off of Jesus and start to sink.

We do serve a God who is gracious and loving. Today’s lesson teaches us that God in Christ reveals a righteousness that comes through faith.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

But, God’s gracious way is never an easy way. It is a way filled with striving. It is a way filled with struggle. In order to stay on that straight and narrow way we need the help of fellow Christians.

In another letter to the early church Paul told the Corinthians that they were the body of Christ and each one of them was a part of it. All were necessary, but none were self-sufficient.

The picture that Paul paints of the early church is certainly not an attractive one. In some cases immorality was rampant. Heresies abounded.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today Paul talks in rather gruff language about one such heresy. There were some who said that a person had to become a Jew before they could become a Christian.

Paul called his opponents “dogs” and “mutilators of the flesh” presumably because they said circumcision was necessary in order to enter the community of faith. Even though Paul was striving to follow Jesus in every way it is obvious by this language that even the great Apostle had a ways to go when it came to living the way of God’s grace as revealed in Jesus.

And so it is with us.

We live in a time of great political and religious upheaval. And that upheaval has made its way into the church. There are profound and deep disagreements in the church. And sometimes we are not so gracious in our use of language.

In an effort to refocus the church in a more positive direction many have pointed to the fact that we are the body of Christ and that our diversity is a gift. But, quite frankly some of us have begun to wonder if that diversity is a gag gift!

We are tired of the striving. We are tired of the controversy. We want to get back to the “real” mission of the church instead of all this fruitless discussion. I understand. I sometimes say the same thing.

But, maybe there is a reason for all the controversy and striving. Maybe through the struggle we learn to see what is really important. And our fellow Christians, even (maybe especially) those we disagree with help us refocus our hearts and minds upon the target, the true goal, the love and justice of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Just as it works in my golf game, we often overemphasize one point to the detriment of another. And so we need an instructor. We need someone who will get us back on track as we work to walk together in the way of Christ.

Like Paul we need to forget about the arguments and accomplishments of the past in favor of seeking God’s will today.

How does the cross and resurrection change our lives today? This question can be both painful and redemptive.

RUNNING THROUGH THE THISTLES

There’s a story I sometimes tell people (and churches) that are going through a difficult time, some big crisis or change.

It’s a story about some young boys who used to play barefoot in the Deep South. Sometimes they would forget the time and would find themselves late for supper. Trust me. Mommas in the Deep South do not tolerate boys being late for supper!

So, in order to save some time and avoid the wrath of their mothers, these boys would take a shortcut through the field. Unfortunately there were thistles in that field.

In order to keep pain to a minimum they would run through the thistles. I can just see those boys yelping and yelling as they made their way through those painful minefields as quickly as possible.

Many of us try to minimize the pain in our life using the same technique. We try to forget the past as quickly as we can and press on to something else. We run through the thistles in an attempt to get to a better, safer place.

But, I’m not so sure running through the thistles is a helpful technique for people or churches that have a big problem. When you run through the thistles the thorns go deep, and they are difficult to remove.

When Paul talked about forgetting the past and pressing on toward the future, he was not saying that we should run away from our problems. He was not telling us to make a mad dash through the thistles.

He was telling us to look at our lives and our problems from a different perspective, the perspective of the cross and the resurrection. Both the sacrifice of the cross and the power of the resurrection are present in our lives as we run the race that is set out before us.

The Christian life is not a mad dash toward oblivion. The Christian life is steadily pressing on in good times and bad toward our goal. Our goal is Jesus, the one who shows us concretely the way, the truth and the life.

The Christian life has a heavenly goal, and that makes all the difference.

LIVING FOR THE GREAT DAY

Langdon Gilkey wrote about prison life under the Japanese during WWII. He said that they did their work because it had to be done. They took no pleasure in it.

But, one thing gave them hope. That one thing was thinking about that wonderful day when the war would be over, and they would get to go home. They would be free to do what they wanted and go where they wished.

He wrote, "No biblical prophet strained toward the day salvation more eagerly they we did. We did not know the time or the hour, but inwardly we were more than ready."

Those prisoners lived with freedom in their hearts.

And I think that Paul is suggesting something similar in this passage. I think that Paul is suggesting that we should live with heaven in our hearts. Instead of dwelling on the mistakes of the past or just going through the motions today, God would have us live today in light of eternity.

We are guided by the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus, and that Great Day of salvation that is coming through Him.

When we take the Lord's Supper we say that it is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. It is a reminder that we live by an eternal grace, a grace that is greater than all our sins and a resurrection that offers hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

Today I invite us to set a higher goal. Christ has called us. Christ has made us His own. Let us trust that promise.

And let us run with perseverance the race that is set out before us. (Hebrews 12:1)

Amen.