

18th October, 2020
Philippians 3:1-14
“Pressing On”

Happy Anniversary! Thank you for your part in helping others see Jesus; Thank you for the decades of faithful service as you have been part of the training, equipping and releasing leaders/workers for the harvest fields locally and globally.

Introduction:

As I've prepared this message, I couldn't get out of my mind a story Dr David Jeremiah shared last Sunday. He has been doing a series on "Moving forward" and he used v13 of our reading from Philippians 3. *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.."* Now, when we celebrate anniversaries, we do look back to celebrate all that God has done. But we also let go the hurts or failures of the past that may hinder us for the future.

Dr Jeremiah used the story of what became known as "*The Miracle Mile*". It was at the Vancouver Commonwealth Games in 1954 between Australia's John Landy and England's Roger Bannister. Bannister had become the first runner to break the four-minute mile, but Landy broke his record in Finland just before their meeting in Vancouver. So, the world's media was focused on this event. To cut a long story short, Landy in his indomitable way set the pace so high that he left most of his competitors in his wake. However, Bannister hung in there right up to the final lap knowing that his ability to sprint the final straight could win the day. As he entered the straight Bannister was catching Landy. Just meters from the finish Landy as he glanced over his inside shoulder, Bannister raced past on the outside and crossed the line in 3.58.3, with Landy just 0.8 seconds behind. Landy once likened it to Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt when she looked back to Sodom. Genesis 19.

Our passage today from Philippians 3 encourages us to look forward, press on, and put Jesus first over all other things.

The late Fred Craddock told a story about a missionary family in China who were forced to leave the country sometime after the Communists took over.

One day a band of soldiers knocked on their door and told the missionary along with his wife and children that they had two hours to pack up before these troops would escort them to the train station. They would be allowed to take with them only two hundred pounds of stuff. Thus, began two hours of family wrangling and bickering about what they should take. "What about this vase? It's a family heirloom, so we've got to take the vase." "Well, maybe so, but this typewriter is brand new and we're not about to leave that behind." "What about some books? Got to take a few of them along". On and on it went, putting stuff on the bathroom scale and taking it off until finally they had a pile of possessions that totalled two hundred pounds on the dot!

When the soldiers returned, they asked, "Are you ready?" "Yes," they answered. "Did you weigh your stuff?" "Yes, we did." "Two-hundred pounds?" "Yes, two-hundred pounds on the dot." "Did you weigh the kids?" "Um...no. Weigh the kids?!!!" And in an instant the vase, the typewriter, and the books all became trash. None of it meant anything compared to the superior value of the children.

Sometimes things happen in our lives in such a shocking way that we are instantly forced to view all of life in a new light because of it. What had previously been of value to us comes to mean absolutely nothing—and we are more than happy to leave it behind.

And that is the way it worked in Paul's life as it pertains to His relationship with Jesus Christ.

1. An invitation to reflect on what we value most.

A recent poll revealed that western society values "time" first, with "career," "success," and "money" coming in as close seconds for certain groups of people. What we value most is likely demonstrated by how we spend our time, and how we spend our resources.

At one point, the apostle Paul spent all his time and resources pursuing and persecuting Christians, establishing a successful career as a devout Pharisee. When he writes the letter to the Philippians, he has changed course so that he now spends all his time and resources pursuing Christ. His career success appears to be in shambles because he lands in prison for the sake of Christ.

However, what looks like a failed career contributes to the fulfillment of Paul's calling as a minister to the Gentiles because he is able to communicate the gospel to the prison guards (2:12-18). Paul's change of course demonstrates what he values most.

In our text, Paul argues against valuing the "flesh," or what he calls "confidence in the flesh" (3:4b). Chapter 3 opens with Paul's warning against false teachers who insist that a person must be circumcised in order to be a member of God's people (v1-3). In other words, they insisted that a person must become a Jew in order to become a Christian. Their religion is directed by external rituals.

By contrast, Paul speaks of religion that is directed by the Spirit of God (v3). The point is not that external rituals are wrong, but that without the Spirit's generating work, they are fruitless. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant, but it was meant to point to an inward reality, the circumcision of the heart (see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 44:7). When Paul writes about confidence in the flesh, he means valuing circumcision and other exterior rituals most.

To illustrate this Paul uses himself as a negative example. He has more reason to boast in the flesh than anyone (4b), and lists seven advantages he could claim (v5-6). The first four advantages are inherited:

- 1) He is a full member of God's covenant people ("circumcised on the eighth day"),
- 2) He is an Israelite by birth with all the rights and privileges that adhere ("a member of the people of Israel"),
- 3) He hails from one of the two tribes (Benjamin and Joseph) considered to be faithful to the covenant ("of the tribe of Benjamin"),
- 4) He is the son of Hebrew parents with no Gentile contamination, ("a Hebrew born of Hebrews").

The last three are achievements:

- 5) He practices strict observance of the law ("a Pharisee of Pharisees")
- 6) He exhibits avid devotion to God ("as to zeal, a persecutor of the church")
- 7) He is above reproach according to a Pharisaic interpretation of the law ("as to righteousness under the law, blameless").

Then Paul makes a big contrast with a little word: “But” (v7). He contrasts his old mindset and actions (v4-5) with new ones (v7-9), using the language of accounting (“gain” and “loss”). The end of a profit and loss statement shows the net loss or net income, indicating the extent to which a business, craft, or household is profitable.

“I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...”

Since Jesus found Paul on the Road to Damascus, everything is different. Where he once ran after Christians to persecute and approve of their murder, he now runs toward Christ to be found in Him.

Where he once prided himself in his ancestry and his achievements—that stuff means absolutely nothing to him now. Paul has a new goal, a prize that is worth it—Christ Jesus His Lord.

Before Paul’s conversion, he had believed that righteousness or goodness or perfection was something he could achieve through his hard work and dedication, through his own efforts. If he just gritted his teeth and tried hard enough, he would succeed. He just needed to have enough will power.

Paul’s vision of the race of life had been one that turned his days into a grim and gruelling guilt-racked grind, a kind of never-ending death march where you have to justify your existence and self-esteem every day, a joyless jog up a never-ending hill in cold, snow and rain. Life was a battle that Paul had to conquer on his own.

This is not another battle he must conquer by gritting his teeth and trying harder—because now the Marathon—Like News, has reached him that God has already conquered, that God has already won the battle!!!

2. Our confidence and security need to be in Christ alone!

Paul is running the race, pressing on, straining forward for what lies ahead—and he is doing it with a smile on his face, and joy in his heart. He is running in a different way now than he did before. He is running with the freedom of someone who has nothing to prove.

Christ has done for him what he could never have done for himself. He no longer has to justify his existence by his achievements in the race of life; Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for him has justified his existence. The huge burden of expectation that was on his shoulders has been removed. Now the race ahead of him, however hard it might be, isn’t a grind of guilt but a race of grace. Now he is free to choose to run.

- He follows Jesus, not because he must, but because he may, because he can!
- He hits the hill with a smile, because there is nothing better than knowing the beauty and love of Christ and letting it flow through you to others.
- He runs because all the way to heaven is heaven, because the Christ who is the prize at the end of the race is also, mysteriously, the pace-setting partner at our side, meeting us stride for stride.

This race of grace is not some test of willpower or personal worth anymore; it is a joyous journey with good news filling up our soul.

It is very easy in our lives of faith to get caught up in what has been done in the past and only note what we have experienced or have done before. This can be good, of course, as we recall those foundational and pivotal moments to our relationship with God. But it

can also leave us with a belief system that is in the past, rather than one that engages us now in the present.

Paul, I think, would have us work to let go of the things in our past that distract or encumber us so that we can pay attention to the here and now. Then, we can look ahead and **press on** to the future that lies before us. In order to get there, he suggests that we focus on the one who is responsible for it all – Jesus, who is indeed ahead of us. Consider the chorus to the old hymn as our refrain:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory grace.*

These words were written in 1922 by Helen Lemmel, and the verses speak to those struggling with weary hearts and to places where evil seems to envelop all light and hope with darkness. In the face of heartbreak and tragedy, these words are a powerful testimony to the transforming power of Jesus Christ; of the good news of the resurrection that said evil and sin in this world would never be the final answer.

This is the hope of our faith, and it needs to be spoken over and over again – as 2020 has provided bush fires, floods, a global pandemic and State wide lock downs. As people of faith, we need to cling to the hope that Jesus can and will change these realities.

Paul calls us to *press on* towards a fuller participation in the life-giving transformative work that God has done and is doing in the world through Jesus Christ.

- This means being a witness of compassion and love,
- This means looking around our own community and asking if we are showing Christ to each other every day in ways that foster peace and usher in the kingdom of God.
- This means spending time in prayer and reflection on what our own “heavenly calls” might be, whether around these circumstances, or others where we are passionate.

The life of faith is about action and continued discernment. This is what “pressing on” toward Jesus is all about, and our text for today urges us to examine our own lives and consider how well or not the decisions we are making is leading us in closer relationship with Christ.

Conclusion: The challenge is two-fold:

- 1) Stop living in the guilt and shame of your failures and take hold of Christ free gift of grace and love. His strength is made perfect in our weakness! v10-11 ***“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead”.***
- 2) Put no confidence in your own efforts and surrender your expectations and accolades to God. Our striving is like chasing the wind and our stresses are temporary. Let the sum of our choices be to take hold of he who has taken hold of us! v13b-14 ***“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”.***

Prayer: