

“Keep On Keeping On”

Our text today is very much connected to our reading from last week. This is obvious from v.12. “Not that I have already attained all of this, or been made perfect.”

Obtained what?

Well we have to go back to Philippians 3:1-11 to find that out.

In that section of the letter Paul talks about his aspirations of “forsaking all” that he might “gain Christ” in his life (v.8), and his desire to attain the “resurrection from the dead.” (v.11)

This is what Paul is after, Christ and Christ alone, nothing else, and life in the Kingdom of God, full and complete; not just his spirit in God’s eternal kingdom, but his body as well. He wants God’s full and complete redemption. But what Paul is saying here in our text today is that he has not “obtained all this” yet. He is still a work in progress.

Paul Does Not Want to be Misunderstood

Paul was concerned in this section of the letter that everything he said in the first part of Philippians 3 would be misconstrued by his readers.

In Philippians 3:1-11, the apostle listed his impeccable credentials.

- Circumcised on the eighth day (a good Jew)
- Born of the tribe of Benjamin (royal blood)
- Hebrew of Hebrews (well educated)
- A Pharisee (knew the law up one side and down another)
- As for zeal, a persecutor of the church (willing to kill in his former life)
- As for legalistic righteousness, faultless, (he kept the law tit for tat).

There was nobody who had their act together more than Paul, but along comes Jesus.

The risen Christ appears to him on the road to Damascus and blinds him with the light of his grace. “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Paul then realizes that all his credentials mean nothing in the sight of a holy God. So in one blinding moment God changes Paul from being a “Christ hater,” to actually believing that Jesus is who he says he is; the eternal Son of God who has come down from heaven to save sinners and secure their forgiveness through his death on the cross.

Once Paul embraces this truth everything changes for him. His credentials go out the window. Paul wants to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in his life, nothing else. Everything else, including his credentials, becomes like “dung” to him.

This is what Paul said in the first part of this chapter and now in our text today he wants to make sure that his readers do not make the mistake of thinking that even though he now considers “everything to be a loss when compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ,” that Paul has now somehow arrived.

He has not arrived. He is not sinless and he is not perfect.

Paul is a man who, just like the Philippians, is still trying to “work out his salvation with fear and trembling.” Paul is a man who still “wages war against the flesh,” sometimes “doing the very things he does not want to do, and failing to do the things that he wants to do,” just like the Philippians.

Paul has not arrived, but Paul does “press on to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ took hold of him.” (v.12)

What Should We Forget, as We Press On in Our Christian Faith?

Verse 13 of the text is one of the most interesting verses in all of Philippians. In that verse Paul talks about “forgetting what lies behind and pressing toward what lies ahead,” as he “presses on” in his Christian faith.

What is it that Paul is forgetting, as he presses on? Is he forgetting all his past sins? Is he forgetting the fact that he once put Christians to death? *Or* is he forgetting all of the progress he has made in his walk with Christ?

Some might say that what Paul is talking about is forgetting his past sins and failures, but this is not so. The context of chapter three suggests otherwise.

What Paul is really talking about is forgetting all of his past spiritual successes in his journey with Christ.

Remember, Paul is concerned that some people who are reading this might be thinking at this point in the letter that he is saying to them, “Hey, look at me, I’ve finally arrived in my Christian faith. I no longer value my previous credentials; I now see them in their proper light. Now I know they mean nothing to God. And not only that, but I have traded in all of that junk that I once thought was so good for knowing Christ and Christ alone. I consider it all to be “dung” when “compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.”

After hearing that in Philippians 3:1-11, some people in the church might now be thinking that Paul has arrived. But what Paul is saying in Philippians 3:12-4:1 is that even though I now see my past credentials in the proper light, and even though I have made great progress in my Christian faith, I forget all of that and I still “press on.”

Though God has done great things in my life through Christ, I still have a long ways to go in my faith; therefore I shall “press on” to “take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Even though Jesus fully knows me I do not fully know him, says Paul. Even though my sins are fully and completely forgiven, I have not fully and completely repented of my sin; therefore I will forget about my past successes and I shall keep pressing on in my faith.

Like the Athlete, We Should Quickly Forget Our Successes

What Paul is saying here in the text raises an important point about what we ought and ought not to forget in our Christian life.

In a very real sense we should not forget our past sins and failures.

Yes, when we come to faith in Christ our sins are fully and completely forgiven, and for sure, we ought not to live under a spirit of guilt and condemnation, nor should we dwell on our past sins, but we ought not to *ever* forget them. In fact, we cannot forget our sins; the scars are there. Paul himself, on several occasions in his writings, recalled his chief sin, that of persecuting Christians in his former life (we saw that in Philippians 3:6).

The scars of our sins keep us ever mindful that we have feet of clay. They also serve to remind us of the deep pain and emptiness that going our own way causes God, us and others, and they should also remind us of how much a holy God loves us, in that He forgives all of our selfish, wicked, and deceitful acts and attitudes of sin, through the death of Jesus on the cross. In short, God desires to take the remembrance of our past sins and use them for great good in our lives.

But as for whatever progress in our Christian faith that we have made thus far, that we ought to quickly forget, lest we become puffed up, prideful, and prone to rest on our laurels.

The moment we begin to hold our progress in the Christian faith in high regard is the moment we will be overtaken by pride, perhaps thinking that we are beyond falling, and it is the moment we will be overtaken by sloth, growing lax in prayer, worship, and service, and in the study of God’s Word.

We should never think that we have “arrived” in the Christian faith. None of us have arrived. We all have “straining ahead” (v. 13) to do, as we “press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (v.14)

This should be our approach to the Christian life. It should be like that of an athlete. This is the imagery that Paul is using here. The apostle knows that if there is anyone who cannot live in the past it is the athlete. The moment he begins to glory in his past achievements is the moment his game will go down the drain.

It does not matter to your opponent what you did last year, and you will not win this year based off your past victories. You will only win your race if you forget about last year's trophies and train and punish your body in preparation for this year's competition.

It is the same in the Christian life. We must continue to train hard today in order to become the persons that God intends for us to be as Christians, and we must continue to train hard today in order to be obtain that which Christ Jesus has in store for us in eternity.

Forgetting the Sinful Life

There is one other way that today's text connects with last week's reading from Philippians 3:1-11.

In last week's reading the apostle attacked those in the church who were rigid legalists.

These legalists, who were Jewish Christians, were insisting that Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ had to adopt Jewish customs in order for them to be truly saved. This most notably played itself out when these Jewish Christians insisted that their Gentile brethren be circumcised in order to become true believers.

To rigid legalism Paul said no. He told the church that Christ and Christ alone saved. Jesus is the grounds for their righteous standing before God, nothing or no one else can save them.

But in our text today Paul deals with another problem of sorts. The problem is not rigid legalism, but rather an "anything goes liberalism."

This problem was creeping into the church not from the Jewish legalists, but rather from new Gentile believers who were coming into church from a pagan, Greco-Roman worldview, which viewed the material world as inconsequential at best and evil at worst, and only the spiritual world as good.

This form of belief was called Gnosticism, and it in essence said that "the spirit is good" and "the body is bad." So consequently, to many Gentile Christians it didn't matter to them what they did with their bodies when it came to food, sex, or alcohol. They could eat and drink as much as they wanted, and they could sleep with whomever, since the only thing that God cared about in their worldview was their spirit not their bodies.

Consequently Paul attacked these libertines and he told the church do not be like them. "Their god is their stomach, their glory is their shame, and their mind is set on earthy pleasures. They are enemies of the cross and their destiny is destruction." (v.20)

Paul's problem with them was that their spirituality was not affecting how they handled their bodies.

Paul was all about glorifying God with his body because he knew that God raised Jesus from the dead, and consequently God was going to raise his body from the dead as well. If that was the case then the way a person used his body really did matter to God. That's one of the central things that Paul is trying to get across in this whole chapter. We see it in verses 10-11, 12, and 21.

- V. 10-11- "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow to attain the *resurrection from the dead*."
- v. 12- "That that I have already obtained all of this, or been made perfect" (meaning the resurrection of the body).
- V. 21- "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our *lowly bodies* so that they will be like his *glorious body*."

So what Paul wants the church to do is to press on, to keep on keeping on, in their walk with Christ, by not falling prey to a liberal spirit that says to them that their morality and holiness is inconsequential to God.

Conclusion

It is no different for us today.

Jesus has saved us so that we might glorify God with our bodies.

We must "press on" and we must keep on keeping on, in our pursuit of holiness.

We must never rest on our laurels thinking that we have somehow "arrived" in living the Christen life.

We must be quick to forget whatever progress we have made in "working out our salvation" and we must continue to "press on toward the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus." (v.14)

That, my friends, is how "we should stand firm in the Lord!" (4:1)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.