

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 13, 2016

**Prayer of the Day:** Eternal God and Father, help us to remember Jesus, who obeyed your will and bore the cross for our salvation that through his anguish, pain, and death, we may receive forgiveness of sins and inherit eternal life; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**Verse of the Day:** The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

**Sermon Text:** Philippians 3:8-14

If you ever ran track— whether it be the 100 meter, 200, 400, 800, 1600, 3200meter, or whatever length— if you ever ran track you probably had a coach who told you: “Run through the finish line.” The point is clear: continue running at full speed until you are past the finish line. The command is so simple, so easy to understand, but may be one of the hardest instructions to follow.

Just ask Molly Huddle. Her 10,000 meters raced to an end; the finish line lay just 100 meters ahead. She recognized two other faster ladies were going to claim the gold and silver medals, but she knew the bronze medal was hers. Running, she glanced over her back shoulder one last time and seeing nobody there, she lifted up both arms in a “V” (the sign of victory) and jogged towards the finish line. The victory was hers— that is, until her teammate sprinted down her left side and stretched out for the bronze.

Or ask Tanguy Pepiot, a runner from the University of Oregon. At last April’s Invitational, he ran all alone out front. He turned the final corner, twisted his head towards the stands, frantically waved his arms, motioning for the crowd to loudly cheer him on to the end— all the while slowing down to a mere trot. All that celebration quickly shifted from him to another competing runner who sprinted right past him for first place.

Or ask Ben Payne, an American runner competing at an Australian marathon. The finish line lay just 10 feet in front of him. He was so close; he knew no one was going to

**Philippians 3:8-14**

<sup>8</sup>What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. <sup>10</sup>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, <sup>11</sup>and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup>Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

catch him—even the announcers said that. He was running so well that he starts fist-pumping the air, slowing himself down just enough for a British runner to snap the finish line first.

“Always run through the finish line,” right? You might remember me saying that before— and I repeat it again because the Bible (in more than one place) compares your Christian life to a race. Those three runners missed out on medals they were certain were theirs. It does not matter how many months they trained or how much of the race they ran or whatever strategies they incorporated into their race. They did not win; they stopped running before the finish line. They lost their prize.

That is why the apostle Paul urges you to keep running to win your heavenly prize. Not that only one of you wins heaven. Rather, all those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Taking your eyes off Jesus’ saving work can leave you losing everything. So, **PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL!** *forgetting what is behind, straining toward what is ahead.*

You have already started that race. At one point, you heard God’s Word, and the Holy Spirit took those words and buried them deep into your heart. For some of you, God’s Word poured into your heart through baptism’s waters. For others, the Word already sprouted and baptism’s waters confirmed your place in God’s family. When you came to faith, the Bible no longer sounded like unbelievable, irrelevant gibberish. Rather, you hear those Words as they truly are— the voice of God speaking to you.

With your eyes set squarely on your heavenly finish line, [you] **press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [you] heavenward in Christ Jesus.** Notice the present tense verb Paul uses. This action of pressing on is to continue. Paul runs beside you, encouraging, lifting up, speaking into your ear: “Press On! Keep your eyes locked on the cross!” Because he knows just how easy it is to focus on something else.

He is writing this letter to the Philippian congregation. They already stood firm on God’s Word— and now, they had to continue standing on it. A different religious group was lurking around their city. They were not starting new churches; they were attending existing congregations. They brought along different teachings. They demanded that believers must be circumcised. They banned certain foods and beverages; they insisted wearing only certain clothing ([Philippians 3:2-4](#)).

These teachings sounded harmless; they actually looked pretty morally good. Yet, this group taught that doing these things would get them into heaven.

Do you see what happens next? Insisting that certain lifestyles or clothing choices or dieting is required to get you into heaven makes you the reason for eternal life. It boldly declares that Jesus (1) did not do enough to save you and (2) you must save yourself!

Even though you and I stand firm on Jesus, the only Way to heaven, it does not mean that the devil stops working on you. He continues doing all he can to pull your eyes off of Jesus’ saving work so that you can find eternal value in something else. He tries to distract you by pointing at your Christian milestones. That because you were baptized or confirmed or married or intend to be buried here, you have no more need to grow in Jesus; just by doing these actions, you have earned God’s forgiveness. He points at your church membership. That you can place your confidence for eternal life in your name

being written the church directory. He wants you to rely on your church service. That because your family helped build the building or donated to some extensive project or you served on a board for years, you have earned your right to go to heaven.

At one time Paul would have agreed with that thinking too. He followed everything God commanded in the Old Testament—and placed his confidence for heaven in what he did. He was circumcised eight days after his birth. His family-line was pure Israelite. He was lead student in his seminary class. He even persecuted people who spoke against these Jewish laws. He arrested them, beat them— and even killed them! ([Philippians 3:4-6](#)). In short, Paul was your “poster-child” of someone God ought to love.

Then Paul takes that poster and rips it down. In fact, he has a word to describe any behavior or action that you feel might earn you a spot in heaven: rubbish. When compared to the forgiveness Jesus wins for you on the cross, our behavior and actions look like a dead, rotting corpse or something you find at a sewage treatment plant. God does not accept such garbage.

Understand, your confirmation, church membership and service are not bad things; they are blessings. Yet, to rely on these blessings as some sort of ticket into heaven takes your eyes down from Jesus, your only Savior.

So, Paul points you forward to Jesus— your only object to trust. **I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.** Your Jesus follows God’s “Dos” and “Don’ts” because he loves what God says. Life’s truest joys are found in reading the Word of God, praying to his Father in heaven, worshipping at every opportunity. Jesus continues growing in this relationship with God. Only because of that perfect heart, Jesus has made peace between God and you. His innocent life is not garbage; it is a priceless jewel set in your crown of life! Because of Jesus, you have that crown of life waiting for you in heaven! ([Revelation 2:10](#)).

This solid truth, this confidence— that everything relies on Jesus— fuels you to **PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL** *forgetting what is behind.*

**PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL** *straining toward what is ahead.* Because your race is not over yet. Paul knows heaven is his prize— and even though he knows this, he makes sure nothing takes his attention off from this prize. He makes sure not to look back and rely on his works. He does not become over-confident in his current knowledge of God that he celebrates too soon and veers off the racetrack. No, he keeps running to that finish line because he has not gotten there— yet. **Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.** Notice, if the apostle Paul—a man who studied God’s Word his entire life, someone called by Jesus Christ himself, a man who devoted many years to missionary trips— if Paul confessed that he needs to remain in the Word of God, then what does that mean for us?

We believe and trust that Jesus is our Savior from sin, but that does not mean we can reach a state where we do not sin anymore. Nowhere does Paul say that you can expect to

become perfectly sinless while living on earth. Because you and I still wrestle with a sinful nature [the desire to disobey God], he urges you to *strain towards what is ahead*. Because until the day you reach heaven, you will hear countless whispers as to why you can relax your running, find confidence in what you already know, and take your eyes off of Jesus.

It sounds harmless— it really does. We may become over-confident in our Bible knowledge—that we feel no need to read it anymore! Or to rely on what we learned in Sunday School or in Catechism class, and stop strengthening, reminding, growing in what we have learned! You might hear the whispers for all sorts of excuses as to why worship is inconvenient. That you do not have to be here every Sunday— because you really just hear the same thing, and you already know what Jesus has done for you. That you do not need midweek Lenten services or Maundy Thursday or Good Friday simply because you never have before. That you just are not a “special-service” kind of family— so no effort is made to ever change that. That your family never attended Bible Class, so why start now?

Sometimes running that race of faith will be tiring and feel unnecessary. It might be painful to choose between activities and spending one short hour with God. It might seem not worth it removing a sin that feels so good for a life shaped by the Word. It might be easy to grow spiritually careless and stop hearing God speak in the Bible. The devil really tries hard to pull your attention away from God’s Word, does he not? He knows that if he separates you from the life-saving Word, then you will take your eyes off of Jesus and start relying on your own knowledge, actions, or family history for eternal life!

So, Paul pleads: **Brothers [and sisters], I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. 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.**

Keep **PRESSING ON TOWARDS THE GOAL!** *Strain* with every muscle *towards what is ahead*. Continue growing in your relationship with Jesus! Gather for worship. Spend the one-hour in God’s Word. Join with others here in prayer. Be fed with your Lord’s soul-strengthening Supper. Read devotions; read little portions of the Bible. Continue asking yourself why these words are important to you. See if those words speak out against a certain action. See where those words encourage you to run away from sin. Attend Bible class. Continue searching the Bible, refreshing yourself with what the Bible teaches. When you recognize sin, call it as it is: wrong. Admit your wrong to God. Be assured of your forgiveness. Ask for the strength to end your wrong lifestyle or habit; ask for the strength to grow a desire to live within the boundaries of God’s will. Throw off everything that hinders, everything that takes your eyes off of the forgiveness of Jesus—and be refreshed to follow God!

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