

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner - Part 15

Sunday, October 4th, 2020, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2051

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FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CHRISTIANS FOR YEARS - THE CONSTRAINING POWER OF EACH NEW DAY IN CHRIST

The most dangerous thing about your repeated ordinary daily life is the way it can make you forget about God. That's the issue clawing at Paul's heart in today's text:

Philippians 3:12-16 - "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. [16] Only let us hold true to what we have attained."

Unless we have forgotten what Paul has been saying up to this point in his letter, these verses should seem strange. They don't seem to be an easy fit with what has gone just before. Consider these words from **verse 9** of chapter 3 - "**....and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith....**"

These are Paul's words to the Jewish religionists who were pressing the Christians at Philippi for **more** effort and discipline and diligence - who wanted to **advance** these new Christians in zeal and the performance of outward expressions of orthodox righteousness.

These are the ones Paul biting called "**dogs**" and "**those who mutilate the flesh**" (3:2) because they were turning away from the **gift** of righteousness through faith in Christ and were pushing these new converts into a life of regulation and discipline and rigor. And Paul would have none of it. The only righteousness that counted at all, according to Paul, was the righteousness that came by **God's** action and **God's** work and **God's** grace in Christ Jesus.

Fair enough. So far, so good. Then, in today's text, Paul seems to get it all twisted around. He seems to be right in their court. He's calling for **more** effort, not **less**. He's telling these Christians to **run**, not **rest**. The verbs pile up, and they sound anything but easy - "**press on**" (12), "**straining forward**" (13), "**press on**" (14), "**what we have attained**" (16).

All of this begs the question - what is the relationship between trusting in the accomplished righteousness of Christ through faith and bending the back to flex all the muscles to pursue the **“upward call”**(14) in Christ Jesus? Do we **trust** or do we **work**? Which is it? And if we **work**, then what is the **difference** between Paul’s work and the works of the Judaisers Paul so roundly condemns? I hope you can see this is not just some cold, academic, theological issue. There are dozens of passages like our text in the New Testament. The Christian life is likened to a **fight**, a **race**, a **contest**, a **war**, and many, many other life events that place strong emphasis on how hard we **work** and **strain** and **run**, and **fight**. How do we put these together with a gospel that comes freely with hope to the empty, the weak, the broken, and the spiritually dead?

That’s the issue. And perhaps it can best be summed up by going back to a question I asked earlier. The real issue at the core of today’s text is simply stated this way - what is the difference between the work called for by the Judaisers and the work called for by Paul? Or, to put it in the race imagery Paul uses, how is the running of **faith** different from the running of **work**?

- 1) **THE RUNNING OF FAITH IS A CONSTANT REACHING OUT IN HUNGRY DESIRE WHILE THE RUNNING OF WORKS IS THE ATTAINMENT OF OUTWARD, PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Philippians 3:12-13a - “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [13] Brothers, ! do not consider that I have made it my own....”

What I’m laboring to get at is the running of faith in Christ Jesus is a race that **always has empty hands** while the running of the Judaisers is a race that **reaches destinations** and **accumulates accomplishments**.

The Jewish law-keepers stressed circumcision. Very well. Be circumcised. There you are. You have done it. There may well be other goals too. But they will soon be reached. That is the nature of **law** righteousness. Ceremonies are measurable. They can be seen and counted and codified and tabulated. Mission accomplished. And we feel the pride of having reached various goals.

Paul actually states this kind of pride of accomplishment in his own religious life in **Philippians**

3:5-6 - “....though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

But the race of faith isn't like that. It's a totally different kind of running. It takes tremendous effort and diligence, but not in the same direction. The running of faith in Christ never **reaches** accomplishments that are **attained** in the sense that they are **put behind us**. The race and the hunger and the passion and the stretch are themselves **part of the gift of grace in Christ**. The more you **race** the more you still **stretch**. And the desire **grows** rather than diminishes.

This is hard to put simply. **Faith always runs and reaches out with empty hands**. The race is always **new, creating its own fresh hunger**. It never rests on **past accomplishments**. Unlike personal righteousness, we never **attain** the righteousness of Christ in the sense of getting it **behind us**. It is always fuller and greater than our reach. It is always **calling out in front of us**, no matter how long we've lived and walked with Christ Jesus as Lord.

This is so important. Unlike circumcision, you never become holy in the sense of **reaching holiness**. You only become holy in the sense of **longing for more holiness**. And you never come to **know** Christ like you know an old pair of slippers, or the way you know your grandmother so well you know what she's going to say about that meal in the restaurant before she opens her mouth.

You never know Christ like that. You know Christ in the way you know what the sky looks like on the most beautiful night you have ever seen in your whole life. You know Him with the sense that there is so much **more** to know. What you know doesn't **quench** the desire to know **more**. It **creates** it. You look up in His fulness the way you looked up at that sky and wished you could have that scene forever. In other words, you know Christ in the sense that you crave to know Him **more**.

This is exactly what Paul means - “**Not that I have already obtained this....I do not consider that I have made it my own”(12-13). And we all want to say, “Well, of **course** you've obtained**

this, Paul. You're an **apostle**, for Pete's sake! If **you** haven't obtained it, who **has**? You've written almost half the New Testament!"(Actually Luke wrote more verses than Paul).

"No," Paul would say. "I haven't obtained it at all. But I've tasted enough that I'm learning how to **chase** it. I'm learning how to **race**. I'm hungrier than ever before. I'm pushing into the wind with all I've got. And I **love** the thrill of the whole thing!" That's it exactly. The **race itself** - that's the gift of God's grace that no personal accomplishment of righteousness can touch.

But pause for a minute. Where exactly does this leave us? If we never reach the goal in this life - if we constantly feel the tug of hunger without completion - are we left uncertain about our future in Christ? Are we forced into desperation about our security and destiny? Where does the **rest of faith** enter into all of this? Paul tells us in some of the most beautiful words in the whole Bible:

2) **PAUL REACHES AFTER CHRIST KNOWING CHRIST HAS ALREADY APPREHENDED HIM**

Philippians 3:12 - "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**"

True, Paul tells us repeatedly he had by no means **apprehended** Christ. He reaches after Him. He presses on to know Him. He has no sense of having captured the prize. But make no mistake, that doesn't leave Paul in the dark. His is a **joyful** race, not a **gloomy** one.

By that I mean his reaching hands are empty of his own accomplishment, but they are **confident** in the grasp of Christ. He hasn't **caught** Christ. No one ever will. Eternity won't be long enough to satisfy the soul with all of Christ's greatness. But Christ **has** caught Paul. Paul is firmly in Christ's grip.

This is another truth almost too wonderful to properly tell. The approach of the Judaisers **seems**, at first glance, to be more manageable. And in a sense it is. **But it constantly leaves us wondering if we've done well enough.** The legal pursuit of God is a **stress filled** race. Its success rests on our moral and religious acumen. And if you fail, the law never offers grace. Only condemnation.

There is a precious lesson here for today's Christian as well. Paul would turn our search for confidence and assurance **away** from ourselves. It's a common mistake to overrate our own ability to judge our spiritual state by feelings of warmth or an acquired ease in prayer and worship or measurable success and fruit in some ministry. Paul turns to none of these for his hope and joy. Christ **has** him. That's Paul's confidence. He doesn't have to hold himself up. He's been apprehended - caught - by none other than Christ Himself.

This is the wonderful paradox in this well known passage. Paul races to be sure. He presses on with every fiber of his being. And, at the same time, he knows Christ Jesus holds on to him. He's in His sure, loving, mighty grip.

3) **IF YOU'VE KNOWN JESUS FOR YEARS, LEARN TO LIVE YOUR CHRISTIAN LIFE STARTING AT THE BEGINNING AGAIN**

Philippians 3:13-16 - "Brothers, ***I do not consider that I have made it my own.*** But 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] ***Let those of us who are mature think this way,*** and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. [16] **Only let us hold true to what we have attained."**

The reason everyone knows and reads and quotes **verses 13 and 14** is we love the **passion** of them. We love the way they **call us on**. They're great **mother-and-apple-pie** verses for pressing on in Christ. We love them even if we're not sure why.

But **Paul** had something very specific in his heart as he wrote these dangerously familiar words. And he had people like you and I in his mind. We all come to Christ the same way. We repent, place specific faith in Christ Jesus as God the Son, the Savior of those who believe. We turn from our sin and start the race. We **all** begin with those common elements.

From that point on, we are all different. We **do** different things. We **like** different things. We **live** in different places. We **work** in different surroundings. There are no two **family situations** exactly alike. In other words, we all **transpose** our walk with Jesus into our own shoes. This is as

it should be. Each is called to follow Christ in his or her own space and time.

But notice how Paul does something **collective** in these verses. He talks of his own race after Christ in those glowing words we all know and love, and then says **everyone** is to have this experience in **common** - **“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way....”**(14-15a).

This is how **“mature”** Christians run the race - not **everyone**, perhaps - but at least all those who are **“mature.”** They all **“....press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”**(14).

We’re not used to measuring maturity by what still needs to be accomplished. Our whole culture trains us to measure accomplishments by looking **backward** into history. And in our text Paul calls these **mature** believers to realize the only part of their Christian experience they need to focus on is the part still in the **future**.

But how do the mature stay so **motivated**? What **sustains** this drive - this fresh hunger in their souls? The key is found in the last half of **verse 13** - **“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead....”**

Paul is crystal clear. This is how **mature** Christians live. They have the ability to **make choices** about the past and the future. They know they live in **time** and can focus on the past or the future. The **immature** don’t, or can’t do that. This is what makes babies babies. They live only in the present.

I have two wonderful grandsons. And I still vividly remember when they were still babies. A baby lives entirely in the **present**. If he’s hungry, he’s hungry **now**. If he’s happy, he’s happy **now**. If he’s tired, he’s tired **now**. If he wants to be changed, he wants mom or dad or grandma to change him **now**. **Now** is all there is to a baby.

Keep this in mind as you hear Paul’s summons to **mature** Christians - **“...those of us who are mature think this way”(15). **What** way? They are constantly **“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead”(13).****

This is the way to run the race. Everything hinges on it. It is so easy to miss this and it becomes the curse of the church. We are all so inclined to look at where we are in our Christian walk and use whatever point we have reached as the spot of ground we **maintain**. But you can't run a **race** like that.

Think of it please. You can never run any race by **holding on to your present spot of ground**. This is what Paul meant when he said he made it a **daily practice** to **"forget what lies behind."** He doesn't mean there can't be nice memories in the past. We all have those. He means you don't look to the past in the sense of **accumulate spots** in your race. Each day brings its own growth and its gains must be **built upon freshly** the day after that and the day after that again.

Remember this. At each point of progress in your Christian walk the most important point is **not** the place you've reached, but how you **view** the place you've reached. Unless you view your present place in the race as a place to be **left behind** it will become your grave. This is how **spiritual decline** sets in.

All of us in this sanctuary and on line are called to **return to "Go"** every day. You haven't **reached a spot**. You're **running a race**. This is Paul's call to those of us who have followed Jesus for some time. There is something in all of us that loves to just **savor the experiences that have accumulated**. It becomes serene to **graze** in a well-worn relationship with Christ. We've earned our stripes, so to speak.

And Paul shouts, **"Leave what's behind!"** Whatever has been precious can become a threat to growth if treated as a **destination**. All that was gained yesterday only has value as it **propels us into tomorrow**. This is what Paul means when he says **"Only let us hold true to what we have attained"**(16).

What does that mean? How do we **"hold true"** to what we've already attained? Paul means to reinforce the idea that we need to **see what we have already attained for what it really is**. Don't make a **destination** of what you've already attained. That is to turn it into an **idol**. It wasn't **attained** as a **position**. It was attained to become a fresh **starting place** at a new level - a **truth** to unpack with deeper and deeper impact.

This takes great humility. It takes **conscious** humility. I'm sure this **leaving behind the attainments of yesterday** is a big part of what Jesus was constantly calling for as He limited entrance into His kingdom to those who were perpetually **child-like**. **Keep fresh momentum** in the race. **Start all over again** - every day.