

The Message

Note: No sermon is quite the same when you read it. You miss the inflections, the understanding that you gain in the hearing. Nevertheless, the words are shared with you here.

Date: August 1, 2010
Scripture: Philippians 3:7-14
Speaker: Lynda Zelenka

CHRIST ALONE

If you've ever been somewhere in public and overheard a telephone conversation, you realize that often such conversations are one-sided. At a grocery store, the manager overheard this conversation.

Hello, sir, I'm calling to see if you need a lawn boy to help you with your lawn work... Oh, I see you already have one...Is he doing the job to your satisfaction?... He is?... Okay, I was just calling to check.

After he hung up the phone, the grocery store manager told him, "If you were just a little older, I would hire you myself. I'm so sorry that you didn't get that job." The boy replied, "Oh, no...I've already got that job. I was just calling to check up on myself."

I believe that it would behoove us to do the same thing in our spiritual journey. In Philippians 3, Paul asks us to ascertain our place in our spiritual quest. In the first part of chapter 3, Paul gives a warning to the church in Philippi. He warns the church not only about some external false teachings but also about having confidence in the flesh. In verses 4-6, Paul writes,

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Let's put these words in today's terms. That proud Pharisee known as Saul of Tarsus had won the Pulitzer, the Nobel Prize, the Super Bowl MVP, an Olympic Gold Medalist, etc. If there had been magazines during that time, his picture would have graced the covers for weeks on end. He would have been on a Wheaties Cereal Box! He would have been named "Most Zealous Man Alive." And one searching for him would have had to move quickly to keep him with him because Saul was not finished in his goal of ridding the world of Christians. His last entry on his Twitter account would have been, "Headed to Damascus."

Outside the city limits of Damascus, Saul met his match in the person of Jesus Christ. Saul was struck blind and silenced by a voice that said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" In that moment, Saul got a glimpse of perfect

righteousness. For the first time in his life, Saul was humbled. All of his trophies and plaques and earthly honors were worthless. Therefore, we can appreciate the use of that little word but in verse 7. After listing all his accomplishments, Paul then says,

But whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him... (7-8)

God called an abrupt and absolute halt to Saul's maddening pace. Saul's entire frame of reference and perspective were altered. His life was changed. Goodness, his name was even changed!

This may seem strange, but in order to turn to the Lord, a person must first be dissatisfied with status quo. His heart must be changed. Unfortunately, many Christians today are so busy climbing the career ladder and raising our families that we have become satisfied with our spiritual lives. In everything else, we are dissatisfied, but we have accepted the status quo with Christ. No longer do we move forward with Christ. Instead, we are satisfied with that status quo.

Let me illustrate. There was a mother and a father who had put their entire household to bed. However, in the middle of the night, they heard a big thump. Checking on their son in his bedroom, they discovered that the child had fallen out of his bed. After they comforted the child, the boy said, "I guess I got too close to the place where I got in!" As Christians, we, too, fall asleep too close to where we entered that personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and we're satisfied.

I always like to have Godfrey preview my sermons before I preach. He gave me this insight: "Interestingly, people are never satisfied with the status quo when it comes to possessions, career, income, and even relationships. We always want more, but the thought of wanting more of God simply wears us out!" So, we don't scoot closer to Him. Instead, we fall out of the bed and fall into the pit (or ditch—whatever terminology you want to use).

Many times it's hard for us to believe that a hard-charging, determined Saul would pen such beautiful words. Rather than being driven by the confidence in the flesh, which he had every right to be, Paul wanted to spend his remaining days getting closer to Christ. To rely on that resurrection power and to suffer with Christ more personally and to conform to the image of God more completely was Paul's purpose. For Paul, in Christ alone was his hope.

After Paul has this conversion, had he arrived? Certainly not! In his own words, he said that he must "press on." Spending three years studying with those who had a personal relationship with Jesus, Paul writes, "I have not obtained all of this." To what is he referring? He's referring to relying on that resurrection

power of Christ and conforming to the image of God. Paul knew that he had not reached that point. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him..." (Phil. 3: 10). Then, Paul writes: "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" (Phil. 3:14).

So, how do we press on? How do we grow closer to God? The first thing we need to do is to plan *progression*, not perfection. We have to make progress in our walk. But, how do we make progress? It's the same way we get in shape physically. We take advantages of those tools and disciplines that help us workout. We work out our salvation in those same ways.

Zig Zigler, a Christian motivational speaker, says, "Many times after I give a motivational talk, someone will approach me and say, 'That talk was great, but for me, motivation just doesn't last.'" Zigler responds: "Neither does bathing. That's why I recommend it daily." I think we need to take his advice on our spiritual growth as well. We need a daily dose of it. If you're like me, you need a constant dose of it!

Let's get practical. One of the ways we need to plan our progression is to realize that we cannot grow closer to God on our own. As a body of believers, we worship together. Most of you are going to a life group today. We can't grow alone. Being a part of a life group helps you to make progress on your walk. If you're not part of a life group, I want to challenge you. This fall we're having a church-wide study for eight weeks. We'll be starting new small groups. Some of these groups will meet on Sunday morning; others on Sunday evenings. We'll even have some groups meeting on the weekdays, in the evenings, and in homes. Some of you may need to host the group or facilitate it in order to make sure that you will attend. After you commit to eight weeks, then evaluate yourself. Have you made progress? I can guarantee that if you commit to the study you will make progress.

Another way we can "press on" is through service. Many in this congregation go on mission trips. However, many are not called to serve in that way. Nevertheless, service is available. For instance, Paco's Kids is in need of help. In ten minutes, you can be at the trailer park where this ministry takes place. It's a wonderful opportunity to serve and it takes place twice a month. If you can't go every month, maybe you can go every other month. If you're a handyman (or woman), join the Backyard Crew.

Some of you may be thinking, "All right, I will commit to a small group for eight weeks, but I can't do that and serve." We haven't launched this yet, but the House of Mercy Orphanage is a wonderful way to serve. Because of unrest in the area, we have had to cancel the mission trip to the orphanage. But House of Mercy is experiencing financial difficulties. Therefore, we're starting a program

called “Extending Mercy.” Our goal is to have 100 families giving \$30 a month to help House of Mercy pay its bills. If you can’t afford \$30 a month, it’s okay—whatever you can give will be appreciated. Through World Vision, I have a child in Zambia that I never see, but this orphanage is five hours away. I can go and meet these children. We know we’re making progress when we use these tools.

Look back on your life. Are you better off spiritually than you were a year ago? Are you moving forward? Some of you might answer, “I’m doing a little better than I was last week.” Okay, you’re on the right track—you’re moving forward.

Next, we must forget what is behind. We all have a past. There are some things in our past with which we need to deal. If you haven’t repented about something, I encourage you to go to the Lord and repent. If you live your life looking over your shoulder, you’re going to be very dissatisfied because there is not one thing in our past that we can change. We can’t change the good or the bad. There is nothing we can do to change it.

There are two things in our past: our attainments and our achievements. What do these things do? They can make us proud by living them or make us indifferent by resting on them. Then we have our failures and defeats that can arouse feelings of guilt and shame. While we need to learn from our past, we don’t need to re-live it—whether it’s good or bad.

In the Old Testament, Joseph, Jacob’s favorite son, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. In Egypt, he was accused of rape by his master’s wife and thrown into prison. But Joseph persevered through everything and rose to the top in spite of his past. He rose to the top in Potiphar’s household; he rose to the top in prison. He interpreted dreams for Pharaoh and then was put in charge of protecting the country during the time of famine. Despite all his past and all his issues, Joseph rose to the top and was able to save the lives of his father and brothers.

Gordon Fee writes that Paul does not totally disregard his own past. Forgetting the past does not mean to disregard it totally. What we need to do is build on our past and learn from it. Let me illustrate. If I walk in the future, looking at my past, what is going to happen? I’m going to stumble. Christ calls us to turn, face the future, the future that holds out hope, and reach for it.

In verse 13, Paul writes, “...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.” Paul is persevering through life. People don’t learn to run a race by reading about it in a book or watching a video. How do they win? They win by discipline, determination, and purpose. In the same way, Paul calls us to “run the race” in our spiritual life.

A few Sunday's ago, I spoke about my being a character witness, along with Betty Devine and Michael Craig, for two beloved friends in our congregation in a court case. As we waited for our turns to take the stand outside the court, Brian and Zoë walk out of the courtroom. We could tell that Zoë was trying to be cheerful and positive; however, we could discern that things were not going well. Brian's countenance was one of despair. Later, we discovered that the opposing lawyers were just throwing Brian's past at him. And these past actions had nothing to do with the case at hand.

In the hallway of a downtown Houston courthouse, there are a lot of people. All of a sudden, as Betty recognizes this despair on the faces of Brian and Zoë, she bursts into singing "In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song, my comforter, my all in all. Here in the love of Christ, I stand." As Betty continues to sing every verse of that song, the countenances of Brian and Zoë change. They *press on*. Folks, they persevered and won that battle. Praise God! If you've never heard their testimonies, I urge you to hear them. Just like Paul, Brian and Zoë know no power of Hell, no scheme of man could ever pluck them from His hands until He calls us home. Here in the power of Christ, we stand.

Just like Brian and Zoë, just like the apostle Paul, and just like so many of you—you have persevered and pressed on through so much because you know that in Christ alone you can. We can make progress on our journeys. We can put the past behind us because we know there is hope in the future—in Christ alone.

As Scott plays "In Christ Alone," the altar is open to those who want to make that commitment for eight weeks and step out on faith. If there is something in the past that you need to put behind you, this altar is open. If you have a loved one that needs pray and needs to progress through his journey, this altar is open. Come to the altar and pray and leave your burden there.