

Press On!

Philippians 3:8-14 April 7, 2019 Pastor Robert Hein

Dear Friends in Christ,

Whenever I write a sermon, I pick one of the three readings for the day as my text. Those are the verses I focus on for my message. As I study that text, I try to determine the main point God wants to get across to us in this specific portion of Scripture.

You see, God's Word doesn't just sit there. It does something to us. The Lord reveals his sacred truths to us for a reason, for a special purpose. Through these words the Holy Spirit is leading us to believe something or do something or receive some special blessing or new insight. And so, that purpose may also serve as the theme for my sermon, often in the form of an imperative.

So let's take another look at the words the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write to the Philippians in chapter 3:8-14, **"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 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, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."**

So looking at the words of this text, what do you think the Holy Spirit is urging us here to do or believe? I will give you several options to choose from on the screen to adopt as our theme for today. Which one do you think fits best?

Be Complacent!, Let Your Guard Down!, Take the summer off!, Rest on your laurels!

Always buy more and more Toys! Rely on yourself!, Boast about yourself!, or Press On!

Which theme do you think best fits our text? What is God urging you to do or believe here? **Press on!**, right? It's obvious! – Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus! That's our theme for today!

Keep in mind that Paul was preaching this sermon to himself first. He was speaking from his own personal experience. You see, at one time Paul had a completely different set of priorities. Paul, or Saul as he was called at the time, had once lived the proud life of a Pharisee. He prided himself on his good life and his faultless keeping of the law. He considered himself to be head and shoulders above everyone else around him, especially when it came to righteous living. He was confident that his personal performance had earned him God's favor and a ticket straight to heaven. Yes, Paul believed he had reached the pinnacle of earthly success and had plenty to boast about.

But then, on the road to Damascus, Jesus, our Risen and Ascended Savior, appeared to Paul, and knocked him off his high horse, literally and figuratively. Paul soon came to realize the error of his ways and the futility of his thinking. Rather than boasting about himself, he became deeply ashamed of his sinful behavior. He had it all wrong. He was actually guilty of persecuting Christ and attacking his followers. Paul had not been on the road to heaven. Rather, he was headed straight to hell, steeped in sin and unbelief. He had not done his duty to God. Instead he deserved God's anger and eternal punishment.

And so everything he had formerly boasted about, all of his accomplishments, all his good works, all his zealous activities, he now realized were completely worthless. He said, **"Whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, 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 on the basis of faith."**

Here is a riddle for you. When can something that is good and beneficial become something that is bad and harmful? The answer – whenever it stands in the way of trusting in Christ as your Savior. You see, Paul had done many outwardly good works as a Pharisee, many civic acts of righteousness. Those were good things. But the problem was that he relied on those good things he had done to be right with God, and as a result,

he didn't think he needed a Savior. And so the good he did actually became something bad, garbage Paul said, because it put up a wall between him and Jesus.

But now Paul finally came to realize that any good he did could not make up for the bad things he had done, and that his best efforts would never be good enough to earn God's favor. It was Paul who later wrote, "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous, not even one. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law. Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.**" Romans 3:23, 20

This news was devastating to Paul. All he had boasted about, all he had placed his confidence in, everything he expected had gained him God's favor was a lie, a pretense, a shame. He was utterly crushed, convicted and condemned

But despairing of himself, the message of Christ crucified became sweet music to his ears. He came to realize that what he could never hope to accomplish in a million years of trying, Christ accomplished for him on the cross. The righteousness he sought, the right standing with God he yearned for, he now received, not through his own efforts, but as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, Christ had led a perfect life in his place and Christ had met God's perfect standards as his substitute. Paul would later write, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" 2 Corinthians 5:21

To Paul, this was incredibly good news, God's gracious solution to his hopeless situation. No longer would Paul boast about himself and what he had done. Instead, for the rest of his life, he would boast about Jesus and what he had done for him. Knowing Christ now gave him the greatest joy! Relying on Christ brought him complete confidence. And living for Christ became his new passion and priority.

Paul said, "**I want to know Christ and power of his resurrection.**" The word "know" here refers to a knowledge by personal experience, to come to know and rely on someone as a faithful trusted friend.

Paul already enjoyed saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He enjoyed life as a forgiven child of God. But he was eager to keep growing deeper and stronger in that relationship, by mediating on God's Word and applying it to daily living. When Paul went through a hard time, he relied on God's strength to handle it, and God lifted him up every time. When Paul needed to make a tough decision, he turned to God's Word for guidance, and he was never led astray. Over time, more and more, Paul came to know and treasure Jesus as a faithful, trusted friend.

Christian friends, you will be richly blessed to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ today as well. Think of a time when you had to face a great crisis or challenge in your life. In your time of need, you turned the Lord in prayer. When you needed direction, you turned to God's Word for strength and guidance. And God didn't let you down. He lifted you up to handle that situation and you experienced the joy of resting secure in his arms of love. More and more you too, over time are coming to know and rely on Jesus as your greatest treasure and your dearest friend.

Did you know that the Apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the Philippians? He faced a very uncertain future. He could be released. He could be tortured. He could spend the rest of his days in prison, or he could be put to death at any time. Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? But that's not how Paul viewed his situation. He said, **"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and participation in his sufferings, become like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."**

Paul didn't know what the future held for him, but he knew who held the future, his future – Jesus, his risen Savior. No matter what happened to him, Paul knew where he was headed – he was on the road to heaven, and every day he put behind him was one day closer to crossing that finish line and entering Paradise. And no one, and nothing could prevent him from reaching his goal – not persecution, not imprisonment, not even death. Jesus died and rose again. Therefore Paul was confident that God would bring with Jesus all those who fall asleep in him.

When Paul says, “somehow” he will attain to the resurrection, he is not worried about the outcome. He just isn’t sure how or when he will die. And the same holds true for you and me. We don’t know when we will die. We don’t know how that will happen. But we don’t have to worry or be afraid. You see, we know the outcome. We understand our final destiny. We know Christ and the power of his resurrection. He will rescue us from every evil attack in this life, and then he will bring us safely to his heavenly kingdom. Such is our hope and confidence in Christ alone!

Now our ultimate goal is to live with Jesus in heaven forever. But God has a purpose for us in this life as well. Paul wrote, “**Not that I have obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**”

So what is that goal for which Christ Jesus took hold of us? Ultimately he wants us to live with him forever in heaven. But what is our purpose in this life? Why are we still here?

For years Paul thought his purpose in life was to gain God’s acceptance and earn his way to heaven. But that was all behind him now. He didn’t have to do anything to earn God’s favor, he already enjoyed it in Christ as a gracious gift.

This saving knowledge set Paul free to spend the rest of his life thanking Jesus for his blessings by honoring him in daily living. He didn’t have to keep track of his good works. He didn’t have to boast about his accomplishments. He didn’t have to worry if he had done enough. Christ had already won the victory for him. He was already perfect and holy in Christ. So now Paul felt compelled to live for Jesus who had died for him. Martin Luther put it this way in his explanation to the Second Article, “**All this Christ did that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.**”

It’s interesting that in these verses Paul describes himself as a finished product and as a work in progress at the same time. When it came to his status before God, he was a finished product. He was justified, declared not guilty of sin and set right before God, on account of Christ. The door to heaven stood wide open to him. But in his daily life, he

was still a work in progress. He still had much to learn. He could always know Christ better. He had plenty of room for spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. And he still had battles to fight, battles against his sinful nature which always pulled him in the wrong direction, and battles against the temptations of the devil and this sinful world which tried to lead him astray. He had to battle complacency, and overconfidence and sinful pride.

And so do you and I. No, the theme of our sermon today is not, “Be Complacent! Let Your Guard Down!, Take the summer off!, Rest on your laurels! Buy more and more Toys! Rely on yourself!, or Boast about yourself!, The theme of our sermon today is “Press On!”

There is no room for apathy or complacency in the heart of a Christian. We must never let our guard down. We must never allow ourselves to drift away from Christ and his Word. We must never lose our hunger and thirst for the Lord’s Supper. We must never allow anyone or anything to become more important to us than our relationship with Christ. Christ is our greatest treasure. Christ is our reason for living. Christ is our source of strength. Christ is our hope for the future. Christ is our prize in the end. Yes, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, let us press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. Amen.