

PRESS ON FOR THE PRIZE

Life Together Series (Part 5) | Philippians 3:1-21

We've been thinking in recent weeks about six crucial callings for our life together as Christians that are both taught and modeled by the apostle Paul in his famous letter to the Philippians. Today, I want to unpack Calling #5 by exploring in depth two of my favorite verses in the Bible. Hear the Word of God as it speaks through St. Paul: **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. (Phil 3:13-14).**

Step One: Focus

There are three words that sum up the calling of this teaching and the first word I invite you to think about as essential to our life together is the word, "FOCUS." Paul puts it this way: **"But one thing I do..."** How many things is Paul concerned with doing? One thing. How unusual is it to meet someone with that kind of focus? Very. If we're honest with each other, most of us will admit that our lives are dominated by the relentless effort to keep many things in our sight. How many of us have single item To Do Lists? For those of us who do, that one item probably reads: "Buy another bottle" or "Get some sleep."

Those single ambitions are our momentary fix for the deeper underlying fact that we have so many ambitions. We want to be terrific and tan and toned and talented and tranquil. We want to be better at parenting or cooking or music or school or sports or sex. We want to keep up with that show or with these friends or with those needs. And very little on our very long To Do List is bad. What we lack is a first love, a supreme priority, a "one thing" whose pursuit could enable us to better prioritize and respond to all the other stuff that tugs at or tantalizes us. What we need is FOCUS on one thing that will improve everything else about our lives.

Speaking of being distracted by a lot of programming, I've been watching this new show on Apple TV+ called the GREATNESS CODE. Have any of you seen it? It features short interviews with people like women's soccer star Alex Morgan, or football great Tom Brady, or track phenom Usain Bolt. As they describe decisive moments in their careers, you notice how these different people describe a similar experience, when the world around them suddenly seemed to hush and what they needed to do became crystal clear, and they rose to peak performance.

I read an article from the BBC that explained how researchers now have a name for this phenomenon. They call it the "quiet eye." It's a sort of enhanced perception that enables the athlete to eliminate distractions and even anxiety as they prepare for their next move. Kinesiologist, Dr. Joan Vickers, hooked up a group of pro golfers to a device

that monitored their eye movements. She found that the better the player, the longer and steadier their gaze on the ball was just before, and then during, their strike. Novices, by contrast, tended to shift their focus between different areas of the scene.”¹

The Bible teaches that there is often a correlation between the way the body works and the way the spirit works. How many of you would like to develop the kind of character that grows calmer and clearer when you are under pressure? How many of you would like to have a greater supply of wisdom and power that enables you to perform at a higher level in your relationships? What about an ability to handle pain and suffering and even death itself without being overwhelmed by despair?

Then let's learn from the apostle Paul. As he writes to the Philippians, he tells us that he has learned to FOCUS. **But one thing I do... I press on toward the goal to win the PRIZE for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:13-14).** Like a lot of us, Paul had probably once had a pretty extensive To Do List. Getting a little more religion and ritual in my life. Finding a bit more balance between spiritual pursuits and worldly ones. Doing some fine-tuning of my character. Trying to set a moderately better example for the kids. Seeking some help with my anxieties. Hoping to rack up more heaven admission points. These are things many of us have on our lists alongside the other more mundane objectives I mentioned earlier.

But Paul would say that the ultimate prize – the one thing we all ought to put at the top of our list and make our magnificent obsession -- is knowing Christ intimately, becoming more and more like him (even where that involves suffering), and abiding so deeply in him that we are filled with his resurrecting power in this life and the next. **I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead (Phil 3:10-11)**

Francis Chan once said to his Southern California congregation: “A lot of people come to church for the wrong reasons. They don't come because they want to know Jesus; they come because they want something from [Jesus]. Did you come here for him?... We're glad you're here. But... what are you after? Churches fill their rooms [or livestreams] every week with promises of money or health. People go to church ‘if God will heal me... if God will heal my child... if God will get me a job in this economy.’ So, people are coming to church in droves, thinking, ‘I'll take Jesus if he'll make me rich. I'll take Jesus if I get to keep all the things I have. I'll take Jesus if I get to maintain this lifestyle. I'll take Jesus if I get to hold on to some of these sins, these immoral relationships,’ this way of talking about politics. ‘I'll take Jesus if I can still be popular, still have this,’ still be unchanged in the way I handle conflict. But, concludes Chan: “The biblical gospel has never been about ‘I'll come to Jesus if...’ The biblical gospel has always been about ‘I'll follow Jesus even if...’ Even if I lose my family. Even if my health deteriorates. Even if people are throwing rocks at me. Even if I lose everything I own. I still want Jesus, because he's that great. That's the biblical gospel.”²

Step Two: Forget

Over the years, I have tried to come at life in the way that Francis Chan describes, albeit imperfectly. I've sought to keep as my "one thing" the pursuit of knowing Christ, of becoming more like him, and abiding deeply enough in him each week that his resurrecting power fills me. I've pursued that heavenward prize, believing that the closer I get to Jesus, the better I will be as child, spouse, parent, friend, co-worker, and neighbor.

But I'll also confess that I've often felt shackled by certain conditions in my life that have slowed my spiritual progress toward that prize. Pastor Bev Savage supplies an image for this I've found helpful. Savage describes a group of horse trainers who establish a cruel contest in order to demonstrate the quality of their horses. The trainers harness the steeds to an overloaded wagon, lock the wheels, and then urge the horses forward with the goal that the creature that manages to pull their impossible burden furthest will be declared the "winner." As the animals struggle against the weight, their masters whip them mercilessly. Some of the poor horses strain so greatly, they tear muscles or damage their hearts and have to be euthanized. Even the so-called "winner" is a loser, for the race doesn't develop them but rather destroys them.

Sometimes, it feels like I am one of those struggling horses, or the people in our church or community are. Maybe you can relate to this experience. We're trying to make progress in the spiritual life but pulling against some terrible weights. Until we find a way to get free of them, we can have the right FOCUS but still not draw closer to Christ, or become more like him, or feel his resurrecting power. This is what Paul means when he says **I press on toward the goal to win the prize... first, [by] forgetting what is behind (Phil 3:13)**. The Greek word for "forgetting" implies casting off or cutting ourselves free from a harness that holds us back. It's akin to the idea the writer of Hebrews stresses when saying: **Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb 12:1)**.

Bev Savage suggests that there are three weights in particular that keep us back in the Christian life and which we need to FORGET or be freed from.³ One of weights many of us face is the bad done to us. People do such heinous and awful things to others. They abuse and betray and abandon and criticize. They fail to love or support the people they should. Some of us come out of families, or schools, or workplaces, or neighborhoods where a lot of bad was done to us or a lot of good withheld. The bitterness or sadness, the shame or confusion that this kind of hurt produces can become an unbearable load.

A second devastating drag on our spiritual progress can be the bad we've done. Some of us are aware of sins of commission or omission that haunt us terribly to this day. The

hurt we've inflicted on others. The moral failures we're guilty of. The lies and lust, the selfishness and pride, the relationships that broke because of our part in them. Even the nagging knowledge that we are probably blind to half the ugliness about our character and conduct that many others and certainly God himself plainly sees. This is a burden that slows our progress toward the prize of the life we could have in Christ.

And, then, there's the most insidious weight of all. I'm talking about all the good we've done. Some of us aren't going to make much progress in knowing Christ or becoming like him or experiencing his resurrecting power because we're already satisfied with ourselves. We're harnessed to this wagon full of all the stuff we believe makes us already pretty exceptional people who don't really need a lot of forgiveness or a lot of improvement or a lot of power to do something new. What's the wagon against whose weight you struggle most? What's in that wagon?

We know that the apostle Paul personally struggled with all of this. As we discussed a few weeks ago, people had done terribly bad things to him. He'd been beaten, whipped, imprisoned, shipwrecked, maligned and mishandled many, many times. He writes this letter to the Philippians while under arrest. Paul also knew what it was to be profoundly burdened by the bad he'd done himself. Paul had stood by and watched as his comrades brutally lynched a man named Stephen. He'd persecuted and sent to jail many Christians. And Paul had also struggled mightily with all the good he had done. In Philippians 3:4-6, Paul details what an accomplished and righteous person he had considered himself to be.

And, then, Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He caught a blinding glimpse of the staggering holiness and goodness of Christ himself and, paradoxically, it opened his eyes. He realized that he was not even close to morally pure, no matter how righteously he had kept the law or done good deeds. He saw that if he was going to be saved, it would be entirely because of Christ's righteousness and love and so he threw himself in humility at the foot of the Cross. To his wonder, he found that Jesus met him with an amazing grace larger than all the bad he had done. And Paul's experience of being forgiven like that, made him willing to now turn and, like Jesus, forgive the people who'd done bad to him and even those who knew not what they did.

The whole orientation of Paul's life shifted. He says to the Philippians: **But whatever were gains to me** (whatever I placed too much value on in the past) **I now consider loss... because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord... I consider them garbage** (the word he actually uses there is a common word for "excrement" – something to be flushed and forgotten, no longer weighing him down). , **that I may gain Christ⁹ 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...** **¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him... ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead (Phil 3:7-11).**

Step Three: Fall Forward

In a nutshell, Paul found a new FOCUS for life. He was able to FORGET or be freed from the good and bad that had weighed him down in the past and, in a beautiful sense, Paul was able to FALL FORWARD. I choose that language and image because Paul describes the spiritual journey here like a great race for a prize. I know from my own experience of rowing on a collegiate crew and of running marathons that there come points in every great race when you are very tired. You feel you're not going to be able to finish on your own strength alone. You pray for a grace beyond yourself, and you just keep falling forward. You dare to believe there is a greater power holding onto you, giving you strength for the next step, waiting to receive you with joy when you cross the finish line. Thus Paul says: **Not that I have already obtained [the prize], or... arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me (Phil 3:12).**

In 1971, the revised edition of John Stott's monumental book, *Basic Christianity*, hit bookstores all over the world. Shortly thereafter, the great English theologian received this letter: "*Dear John, Thank you for writing BASIC CHRISTIANITY. It led me to make a new commitment of my life to Christ. I am old now—nearly 78—but not too old to make a new beginning. Yours sincerely, Leslie Weatherhead.*" Leslie Weatherhead was one of the most influential Christian leaders in the world. He wrote best-selling books. He preached to thousands. He was a pioneer in the field of pastoral counseling and president of the Methodist Conference. He was a member of the Oxford Group out of which emerged the movement we know as A.A. Yet at 78-years-old Leslie Weatherhead was not too proud or tired to make a fresh commitment to Christ.⁴

How about you? Could YOU make a new beginning today? You can and here's how. Forget the wagon that lies behind you. Have faith. Jesus has freed you from that excrement. Focus now on knowing more of Christ. Make that the one thing you do, until you become like him and are filled with his power. You can fall forward into that future. So, press on for the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Please pray with me...

¹ David Robson, "Why Athletes Need a 'Quiet Eye,'" *BBC.com* (6-29-18)

² Francis Chan, "Living With Jesus," *PreachingToday.com*.

³ Bev Savage, "Free and Focused," *PreachingToday.com*

⁴ Roger Steer, *Basic Christian* (IVP Books, 2010), p. 153