

“Pressing On Toward the Goal”

Philippians 3:1-16

November 1, 2020

Read Philippians 3:1-16

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

As we have mentioned several times during this sermon series on Philippians, perhaps the best way to read and understand the tone of this letter is to think of it like Coach Paul giving a pep talk to his team in the locker room. Among other things he was doing with this letter, he was preparing them for the contest out in the world.

Take a look at the structure of our verses today. The beginning and the end emphasize being “in Christ Jesus.” “Rejoice in the Lord.” “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” In the middle is an extended discussion of what happens without being in Christ.

Up to this point in his letter, Paul’s focus had been on personal matters between the Philippians and himself. First, he shared with them about his own situation in prison. Second, he urged the Philippians to be unified and prepared for his visit to them.

Now, in today’s verses, he turned his attention to the opposition. For whom and for what was he preparing them? He was writing from the well of his own experiences. Whether the opposition had already shown up or were on their way, Paul knew what to anticipate. If you can picture Paul with a baseball hat and a whistle around his neck at the chalkboard, he was drawing x’s and o’s. It is as if he was changing his topic from, “Here’s **who we** have practiced to be” and began focusing instead on, “Here’s what **they** are going to try to do.” He was exhorting his friends – yet again – to be wary of anyone trying to persuade them to put their trust in anything or anyone other than Christ.

Two Ways

Paul set out two ways: either being “in Christ” or everything else. Believers are to trust *only* Jesus for your salvation. Nothing else can be added or substituted. That is not news to us. Peter said it in Acts 4: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

We know that is true. However, we also know everyone will not agree. Some will overtly reject that truth (and those who bear witness to that truth). Others will ignore it. Expect opposition. Anticipate opposition. Be prepared for opposition. But remember: you have received *good* news. You do not have to beat your opponent, you simply need to bear witness to what you know is true.

But what does opposition look like?

Sometimes opposition is obvious. For Paul, the fact that he was in prison for his faith was pretty good evidence of opposition to the gospel. And us? Do we really experience it today? Yes, we experience opposition. There is a video making the rounds online of actor Matthew McConaughey talking to Joe Rogan about the opposition to faith in Hollywood. He told the story of his acceptance speech for winning an Oscar. He said when he thanked God, he saw people with whom he had prayed go to clap, and then sit on their hands because they were afraid of what it would do to their career if others in the industry knew they were people of faith.¹ That's a good illustration of the kinds of overt opposition that Christians experience.

However, opposition often is more subtle than we recognize.

Opposition is anything that would pull you away from rejoicing in the salvation you have received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Opposition is anything that would detour or deter you from seeking and serving Christ.

I watched a Netflix docudrama called *The Social Dilemma* this weekend. It was a series of interviews and dramatizations of the intentionally addictive methods and practices of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is worth watching to inform yourself of how and why these companies act the way they do. As one person stated, "You are the commodity these companies are selling to advertisers." Their algorithms are designed to measure and match content to your interest so that each person's feed is unique to that person. The goal is to keep viewers looking, scrolling, and watching so the companies can sell advertisers access to your attention. These programs are designed and intended to be addictive – in ways more powerful than nicotine.

I am going down this road with you to illustrate the point of being aware and intentionally focused on serving Christ, rejoicing in Christ, and living in Christ – and to recognize the subtle opposition you will encounter. For those of you who have social media accounts think about whether you have had the experience of losing hours because you were simply surfing online. (Look, I am not pointing fingers because I certainly have).

Now, the people in this documentary were involved in the creation and development of the platforms of Facebook and Twitter. They talked about how they thought they were creating something good – or at least value neutral. Some good did come out of their work: people reconnected with friends and loved ones. Some are able to do remarkable things like match organ donors with needy recipients. But all the developers confessed that they never anticipated or imagined the ways their platforms would end up functioning in harmful ways. For example, the inventor of Facebook's "Like" button never foresaw the widespread depression rooted in teens who are unable to live up to their online lives – lives that are carefully constructed to garner greater and greater "likes." A second illustration is the reality that these technologies have served not to draw us closer together, but rather have functioned to polarize us to a greater and greater extent. The personalized content allows people to read only those things that confirm or entrench their beliefs and marginalize others – making us think the others are either stupid or evil.

In short, the creators of these technologies ignored or forgot two foundational truths:

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uaw7OQ0vbo>

- a. We are sinners; and,
- b. We are not God and not capable of replacing God.

What we are witnessing – literally – is a modern-day version of the Tower of Babel. We think we are creating tools to reach into heaven with the goal of doing God better than God does God. What is actually happening, however, is the destruction of community and culture, and the fragmenting into anarchy of people who cannot – or are not willing to – understand one another.

Really? Kitten videos and family pictures are leading to the demise of civilization? The means may be subtle, but the consequences of blindly participating are profound, and the destruction is real.

Here, Paul was warning the Philippians to recognize the dangers of those claiming to be Christian but demanding conformity to the Jewish law. Specifically, he was identifying as “dogs” or “evil workers” those who demanded Christians be circumcised in order to be “legitimate” believers. It was a battle Paul had been waging for most of his ministry since encountering Christ on the Road to Damascus. It was a subtle form of opposition for those not paying attention or discerning. It was, “Hey, we are Christians – just better ones. You need to do these things to be more like us if you *really* want to be Christian.”

This is where Paul’s discussion of his pedigree – and his considering it rubbish – was so important for the Philippians to read. The things valued by his opponents were things that we admire: heritage, training, professional accomplishments, and integrity of purpose. Before Jesus, Paul was someone we would have been watching as a rising star on the national Jewish scene. He was well born, well bred, well disciplined, well accomplished, and a well-recognized defender of the faith of his ancestors. In the eyes of the world, he was someone to be admired and respected.

To put it in our American context, it was the equivalent of Paul claiming to be a direct descendant of George Washington, a graduate of Harvard law school, a Mayo Clinic physician, an NFL Super Bowl winning quarterback; Grammy winner, with a constituency clamoring for him to run for President – all in one. He was the end-all-and-be-all Jew of Jews according to the customs.

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ...For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.” There it is again – in the middle of our verses – “be found in him.”

In comparison to being found in Christ, all else is rubbish. The word translated “rubbish” is actually not nearly so polite.

Although traced to the expression..., “that which is thrown to the dogs” it seems to have meant by usage (1) “dung,” “muck,” both as excrement and as food gone bad; (2) “scraps,” i.e., “what is left after a meal”; or (3) “refuse,” “trash” (Koperski’s translation [*Knowledge*,

154]). It is also used to describe a pitiful and horrible thing, like a half-eaten corpse, or “filth,” such as lumps of manure.²

We are to remember and constantly encourage one another to remember that we are in Christ – and rejoice because it is a heavenly calling. All else – all else – is rubbish. The point is to expect opposition and be discerning what is true and really important.

[There is a story] about a group of corporate executives who took a lavish vacation in the Mexican Riviera. While they were there, they met a young boy who had a small fishing boat to take vacationers out onto the water. As the executives got to know the young boy, they began to give him ideas to help grow his business and encouraged him to be more ambitious. The boy, somewhat confused, asked the men why he should do that. They explained that he could franchise his fishing boats in other cities and have his own offices. He could make so much money and be so successful that he'd be able to take lavish vacations like them. More confused than ever, the boy turned to the men and said, "You mean I should do all that so I can come back here and do what I'm already doing?"³

Focus. That is what these verses are all about; Coach Paul was continuing the pep talk. Keep your focus . Do not get distracted by the shouting from the stands. Keep your eye on the ball. Keep your eye on the prize.

Keeping Our Eye On The Prize

How? How do we keep our eye on the prize spiritually?

First, remember what *is* the prize.

The prize is our salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the life everlasting in communion with God – everlasting including now – in which we grow, experience and commune with the living God.

Paul wrote, “beware.” Beware – that is, be aware of and be wary of – those who would require anything in addition to Jesus Christ for your salvation.

Jesus is sufficient. There is no alternative. There is nothing to add. Our righteousness is based on faith in Jesus – alone. It is not Jesus *and* more good works than bad. It is not Jesus *and* an amount donated to the church. It is not Jesus *and* a specific number of worship services a year. It is not Jesus *and* ... anything. Our righteousness is reckoned to us – it is given to us – as a gift of grace by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The only way to stand in relationship with God is by righteousness; and we are unable to stand in righteousness in the power of our own strength, by doing any specific combination of works

² Gerald F. Hawthorne; Ralph Martin, World Biblical Commentary, Philippians v. 43, p. 192.

³ <http://www.foxnews.com/sports/2010/06/21/john-wooden-death-success/#ixzz2Ai6l8s5M>

or by espousing any specific doctrine. It comes by personally submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord of your life and accepting his promise of forgiveness of sins as your savior.

That is the prize. It remains the prize whether you have been a believer for moments or as long as your memory.

Second, remember what has value and what does not.

Paul's Damascus Road encounter with Jesus and his conversion changed his life in a moment. Instead of seeking to acquire all that his ambition set before him, he yielded up all of it. He literally discarded every advantage he held to pursue an uncompromising path of following where Jesus would lead him. He could have been the one Jesus had in mind when he taught,

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44-46)

All of the things Paul's opponents would have foisted on the Philippians – like circumcision – well, they did not add value. Instead, they would have served to cheapen the grace the Philippian believers had received.

Being distracted from "what is most valuable" is a valid criticism of the church today. We have been called and commissioned to be ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Instead, we become shareholders and political parties vying for control of institutions. We – and I confess at times, I – have complained that these issues have taken over and prevented us from pursuing the mission and ministry of the gospel. That is not true. It is an excuse we/I have used to justify not being obedient in mission and ministry. We have allowed ourselves to be distracted by secondary things. Either way, Coach Paul would say, "Quit goofing off and get to it. Share the love you have received by grace."

Third, remember we are on a journey.

The third way to keep our eye on the ball spiritually is to realize **we are still on a journey** to become whom Christ has intended us to be. The writer of Hebrews called Jesus the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." God is not finished with us at the moment of our receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; instead, God is just beginning to "work in us, enabling us both the will and to work for his good pleasure." The heavenly call is to become the people God created us to be. I am not there yet, and I would venture to generalize that none of you are either. The only way to be the people God created us to be is to be in fellowship with God and following Jesus daily.

Paul described the journey of "keeping the eye on the prize spiritually" as "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." The goal is to deepen our faith in Jesus Christ; to

enrich our understanding of who Jesus is, what he did, and where he is leading us to go; and, to share the love we have received in Christ with others. The goal is the journey of faith. It is achieved moment by moment in obedience to God's will while at the same time, it will not be fully realized in us until we commune face to face with the LORD in the manifest Kingdom of Heaven.

The goal is to draw closer to Jesus. Jesus has already given us the tools to do so – individually and as those whom he gathered together as his team. Worship together. Study together. Fellowship together. Pray together.

And, he commanded us to gather together around this table. “Do this,” he said to the disciples, “in remembrance of me.” It is not mere ritual, though. It is a foreshadowing of the hope we have, the fulfillment of the promises of the “prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” because, in this meal: we celebrate the time when we will enjoy the victory celebration face to face with the LORD. Whether that happens in our lifetime, our children's generation, or generations from now, we know it will happen because God is faithful to his promises.

Conclusion

So, let me put on my coach's hat again here for a moment and translate Paul for you: let's go.

Our mission is not a solo endeavor; it is a collective effort. We need everyone to help. We have to nurture one another. We must exhort one another to remember the joy of the salvation we have been given as a gift. We are to reach out into the community one person at a time or one family at a time. We share the gospel one conversation at a time. There is no one who can give your testimony for you. I am counting on you. The people next to you are counting on you.

God has put you in this place for the purpose of using you for his glory – and he is worthy of all your time, attention, and energy. The road is not easy. The opposition is real. But the battle is worth waging.

Let us hold fast to what we have attained. But more than that, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Go get 'em.

Amen.

Prayer

Communion

Questions:

1. If you looked at a calendar of your weekly appointments and activities, what would you say takes up most of your time? Are you keeping the main thing the main thing? Or, have other things snuck in and taken priority?

2. Have you ever had something subtly distract you from your walk of faith and carried you along until suddenly you realized how far off track you were? What was it? What woke you up? How have you grown in your discernment and attention since then?
3. Do you rejoice because you are "in Christ?" What does that rejoicing look like? Feel like? How does it impact your day-to-day life?