

This morning, let's look at some guidance for living the Christian life that the Apostle Paul provides us in his letter to the Philippians. During his second missionary trip, Paul established a church at Philippi. As you read his letters you realize that this was one of his favorite churches and that he had a very close personal relationship with this church. In this letter he provides words of encouragement for the church and congregation as they face trials and tribulations. Let's see what we can learn from Paul in the third chapter of Philippians, verses 12 through 14.

Read Philippians 3:12-14

In this passage Paul compares the Christian life to a race. Did you hear about the race between the lettuce and the tomato? The lettuce was a "head" and the tomato was trying to "ketchup."

Then there were two gas company men, an experienced supervisor and a new trainee, checking the gas meters in a subdivision. They parked their truck at the end of a street and started working their way down the street. At the last house, a woman was watching the two men checking her meter. Finishing their inspection, the supervisor challenged his younger coworker to a race back to the truck; so they took off. As they were running down the street, they realized that the lady from the last house was behind them huffing and puffing. So they stopped and asked her what was wrong. Gasping for air, she replied: "When you see two gas company men running as hard as you two were, I figured that I had better run too!"

In his letters, Paul is always using athletic terms to describe the Christian life. He appears to have been a big sports fan, and I bet that he would have loved our baseball, football and basketball. Those of you who are or have been runners can relate to what Paul is describing here. Our Christian life is not a destination, but a journey. While we use the term "walk" most often to describe our Christian journey, there are times when it seems like we are running for our life. In many ways it is like a race. It has a beginning, an end and a prize. But most of our time here on this earth is spent between the starting point and crossing the finish line.

So let's look at this race called life from a Christian perspective. First, there's the starting line. This is when we accept Jesus Christ into our heart as our Lord and Savior. Some of us approach the starting line slowly having known about God throughout our life, and most likely cannot even tell you where the starting line was or when the gun went off to begin the race. Jesus has been so much a part of our life that we can't tell you when the relationship began. It seems like we have either been walking or running with the Lord all our life.

On the other hand, some of us can tell you the exact moment, time, date, place and even the weather conditions, when we started this race. It was a major event in our life which was brought on by some inspiring moment, a crisis, or the guidance of a friend. Paul fell into this

latter category. His race began on the road to Damascus when he suddenly met Jesus Christ face to face and was temporarily blinded by the light. But whenever Jesus enters our life, there is always a starting point at which time Jesus and the Holy Spirit become our constant walking or running companions.

Now I think the race that Paul is describing here is more like a marathon or cross-country race than a 100 yard dash. It's not a sprint, but a long distance race. Our youngest son, Ben, ran cross-country at Capital High School in Santa Fe to stay in shape for his true loves: baseball and basketball. He didn't mind the beginning and the end, but he dreaded the points in between, especially the hills! And there were many tough courses in his district, especially at Bernalillo and Taos. But he learned that it was in traversing the hills and gullies that he really got into shape and built up his endurance. The same is true for our Christian race. It is in running up the hills and through the valleys of life, dealing with the problems and demands of life, that we grow spiritually and start becoming more like Jesus, moving on to perfection. Note that Paul says that he has not attained perfection, but he presses on towards it. This should be the goal of all us as Christians; to become more like Jesus each and every day.

A television journalist once asked Billy Graham if he was a Christian. Billy softly replied: "I try to be." He went on to explain that being a Christian is an ongoing, endless quest; a process of becoming. Billy's answer captured the significance of this morning text. To be a Christian is not a goal one achieves like a college degree, conferred, processed and hung on the wall. It is more like the goal of improving our health; we have to work at it each and every day.

A former pastor of mine, Warren Latham of Mt. Pisgah United Methodist Church in Alpharetta, Georgia, noted that the Christian journey is not a straight line always going up. It is a series of peaks and valleys. We are going to have high points in our lives followed by low points; times when we are closer to Jesus and other times when we fall short of being a good Christian. The goal is to keep the distance between the top of the peak to the bottom of the valley as small as possible. The greater the oscillation, the harder the race and the less mature we are as a Christian.

In verse 13, Paul gives us two guidelines for running this life race: "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." First, forget what lies behind, don't look back; don't dwell on the past. The great baseball pitcher Satchel Page once said: "Don't look back; they might be gaining on you." Most runners know that you must keep your eyes on what lies ahead of you, on the goal. Three things, all bad, can happen to you if you look back over your shoulder when running. You may either fall down, hit something in your path, or get passed by another runner. When you look back, your natural tendency is to slow down and lose pace. In Luke 9:62, Jesus warns: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." If you have ever plowed behind a mule, you know that you

cannot keep the furrow straight if you keep looking back; you must keep your eyes focused on the target.

Now there are two ways to look at forgetting what lies behind. In Paul's case, he is saying that he does not dwell on his past accomplishments or use them as an excuse for relaxation or retirement. In effect, he is saying that the Christian must forget all that he or she has done, and remember only what they still have to do for God. In Paul's mind, in the Christian life there is no room for a person who desires to rest on their laurels.

But I also think we can look at this as forgetting our past and not letting it hold us back. Our past with its failures, disappointments, sorrows, regrets, and sins can become an anchor in our Christian race. It's like running with a rope tied around your waist with the other end attached to a sled filled with all our guilt and problems of the past piled on it. Paul is reflecting on Jesus' advice in Matthew 11:28 – "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." When we accept Jesus into our life, He wants us to leave that sled with the past at the starting line.

A good illustration is the Balloon Festival that Albuquerque is famous for, and unfortunately, we will not have this year due to the coronavirus. When people go up in a gas balloon (and I don't know why anyone would want to do that), they take bags of sand with them, and when they want to rise higher, they throw the sand bags out. Now there are many Christians who have too many bags of sand, and to rise higher, to grow spiritually, they need to throw them out. These bags include bad habits, past regrets, hurts, addictions, pride, and the need for repentance.

While we are to leave the past behind us, we must also learn from our experiences and use the past as a foundation for growing in Christ, and not as an anchor. Here's some good advice for all of us: learn from the past, live in the present and strive for the hope of the future.

This leads us to Paul's second guideline which is recorded in verse 13: "Strain forward to what lies ahead." Different translations of the Bible record this action as "strain forward," "press on," "reach for," and "pursue." In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul tell us "to work out our salvation." Anyone who has ever run a race understands the meaning of these verbs. Running can be tough. There are times when you want to quit. At some point in the race, you hit a wall, your heart starts pounding; you are gasping for air; your chest feels like it's going to explode; your feet ache; you're sweating like a pig; and you feel like you can't go any farther. If you are a runner, you know what I am talking about. As Christians, we all reach this point, not once but many times along our journey with the Lord.

Paul is speaking here from experience. He has been there. He shares his personal struggle with trying to live the Christian life in Romans 7:21-25 where he writes: "When I want to do good,

evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul is baring his very soul here. He knew what was right and wanted to do it; and yet, somehow he never could. He knew what was wrong and that was the last thing that he wanted to do; and yet, somehow he did it anyway. It was as if he had a split personality; two extremely different personalities – a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde – each pulling him in different directions. Have you ever felt that way?

Well, the answer to our struggle is Jesus Christ; He can help us deal with the problems and decisions that come up each day. Paul tells us to press on, keep going. Take one step, one day, at a time. Keep putting one foot in front of the other. Remember, unlike a cross-country race, you are not running this race alone. Jesus is with you and so are your fellow believers. We are all in this race together as the body of Christ.

And why do we press on? Why do you run the race? Because our eyes are on the prize that Jesus Christ has already won for us on the cross at Calvary and the empty tomb on Easter morning. Paul is using the example of a Greek race where the winner received a wreath of leaves and sometimes a cash award. As Christians we rest in the assurance that we will receive an award of everlasting glory, eternal life with God and His Son.

In his book, *Hope for the Troubled Heart*, Billy Graham tells about a friend stopping on a London street corner in London and listening to a man playing the bagpipes. He was playing *Amazing Grace* and smiling from ear to ear. His friend asked the man if he was from Scotland, to which the man replied: "No sir, my home is in heaven; I'm just passing through this world." He had his sights on the finish line and the prize. Those of us who believe in Jesus Christ are also just passing through this earthly life on our way to heaven.

As Paul saw it, the Christian is an athlete and playing on the team of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not a spectator sport; it's something in which we all must be involved. One of my favorite movies is *Forrest Gump*. A famous line in the movie is when his childhood sweetheart Jennie yells: "Run, Forrest, Run!" This morning, Paul is yelling to us: "Run, Christian, Run!" Run for your life. The best is yet to come, don't give up, finish the race. Leave your past behind you and strive to be all that Jesus wants you to be. Run with the Lord. When Jesus went back to heaven, He left the door open for you and for me. All we have to do is run straight for it with all our heart. It's always open and Jesus is always there waiting to welcome us home. Amen