

“Reaching for the Prize”
Sermon Series – Christ: the Source of our Joy and Strength
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Phil. 3:12-4:1)

Introduction.

In the 1948 Olympics held in London, Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia won the gold medal in the 10,000-meter race. However, he came in second in the 5,000 meters and lost by only .2 of a second. The day after his loss, he began training for the next Olympics that were to be held four years later in Helsinki, Finland. At the 1952 Olympics, the "bouncing Czech", as Emil was called because of his ungainly running style, won the gold medal and set world records in winning both the 5,000 and 10,000-meter races. Only three other men had ever won both events at an Olympic Games before.

Despite his victory at the London Olympics, and despite the crushing disappointment of coming so close to winning a second gold medal, Emil Zatopek was able to leave behind what had happened before in the previous Olympic Games, and he pressed on to running the races that were before him. He didn't rely on his accomplishments in the past nor was he crushed by his previous failure to prevent him from giving his full attention to the race that was right in front of him.

That's a remarkable quality, and it's something the apostle Paul could relate to in living the Christian life. He writes about it in his letter to the Philippians in the passage we're going to study this morning.

I. Forget what Lies Behind.

Up to this point Paul had been very clear in his writing and very definite in his insistence that righteousness comes only from Christ, and we can't earn a "righteousness of our own" by living a good life or doing good deeds. Since Paul argued strongly against the idea that you can earn God's love or do anything to win your salvation, we might then expect him to say that now you and I can just rest in God's love, and there's nothing more we need to do to add to what Christ has already done for us. We might expect him to say, "Sit back, take it easy, and enjoy a life of spiritual blessing. You don't have to do anything more since Jesus already did it all."

However, Paul has nothing like that in mind at all. Instead, his experience of grace produced in him even more motivation and energy than he ever had before

when he tried to live a life of self-righteousness and legalism. He writes, “*Not that I have already obtained (knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection), or have already been made perfect, but I press on.... One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on...*” (Phil. 3:12-14).

In these verses Paul uses an image from the world of athletics, and he describes an athlete who is committed to running a race. There are two kinds of incentives that motivate athletes. The first is the pressure on an athlete who is trying to earn a place on the team. I remember this kind of pressure when I tried out for the JV basketball team when I was in the 9th grade. I was so nervous, and I tried so hard, but I didn’t make the team. I was cut after the first practice. Have you ever felt the pressure to earn a place on the team and felt like you didn’t measure up?

But there is another kind of incentive or motivation in sports which is the joy to excel which comes to a player because he or she is already *on* the team. They want to play well and help everyone else on the team succeed. That’s a different kind of pressure. One is to earn a place on the team; the other is to help the team succeed. Do you see the difference? Paul is describing the second kind of motivation. We run the race, not in an attempt to make the team (to be accepted by God), but because we’re already on His team and we’ve been chosen by Him.

The secret of Paul’s motivation lies in his deep personal awareness of Jesus’ unconditional acceptance and the fact that there was nothing Paul can do that would cause Christ to love him any less. This motivated the apostle to try all the harder to please Christ and to live in a manner that was worthy of such unconditional love. The effort Paul describes in Philippians 3 isn’t working *for* his salvation. Rather, it was working *out* his salvation and living in the light of the implications of Christ’s love in his life.

As a pastor I find that most people have a hard time forgetting what lies behind. As human beings we all struggle with this, and we have a tendency to do one of two things. Either we have a hard time leaving behind our past failures and the many ways in which we’ve messed up in life, or we struggle to leave behind our many accomplishments and the accolades we rely on to establish our sense of identity and self-worth in this world. In either case, we’re trapped in the past, and we lack the freedom God wants us to have to fully live in the present.

Sometimes I play the game of “what if.” You know, it’s when you wonder how your life would have been different if only you had made *that* decision, or gone in that *other* direction than you actually did. Do you ever do that? You can never win the “what if” game, and it always leaves you empty and wanting. In addition, if you rely on the good things you’ve accomplished in the past to prop you up emotionally and make you feel good about yourself, then you’re missing out on the challenge of today. You’re relying on a hollow set of accomplishments and an image that you’ve tried to construct in your own mind.

They say that in most sports, other than speed and quickness, the most important asset for an athlete to have is *a short memory*. These are athletes who are able to forget how they screwed up on the last play and just focus on the next play that's right in front of them. And they are also people who don't get cocky about how well they performed on the previous play which might then make them overconfident and then they get burned by their opponent on the next play. The awareness of God's unconditional love and acceptance gave Paul the ability and freedom to focus on what was most important – living for Christ *today*, and it enabled him to press on toward a different kind of goal in his life. That goal was the prize of Christ.

II. Press On Toward what Lies Ahead.

“I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do: Forgetting what lies 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” (3:13,14). Paul was able to make this statement with great confidence because the grace of God had removed all the guilt he felt for the things he'd done wrong in the past, and God's grace also removed any anxiety he had about the future. He was able to live in complete freedom in the present because he didn't have to worry about earning God's love, and he wasn't afraid of the future because He knew God had a good plan for his life.

The image Paul paints in this passage is of a runner who is straining to break the tape at the finish line of a race. Every ounce of energy is expended and every muscle is flexed with the sole intention of completing the race in the strongest possible fashion. The runner knows the race isn't over, and there is more work yet to be done. He or she hasn't completed the course, so they work as hard as they can to finish the race strong.

Notice what Paul says about himself. He acknowledges that he isn't perfect. He knows he hasn't already obtained spiritual perfection. That's why he realizes God has more work to do in his life, and it's also why he strains toward what lies ahead. Growing in grace means learning more and more how to live with the awareness of the forgiveness of Christ and the security of our future in Him, and it's trying, by the power of God's Spirit, to conform our lives more into the image of Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith.

Many years ago, Billy Graham's wife Ruth Bell Graham was driving through a construction zone on a highway here in North Carolina, and she carefully followed all the detours and the mile-by-mile cautionary signs. Then she noted that when she got through it all there was a sign that read, “End of construction. Thank you for your patience.” When she arrived back home in Black Mountain, she cheerfully announced to her family, “That's what I want engraved on my

headstone when I die!” Ruth was lighthearted, but she was also quite serious in her request, and she even wrote it out so no one would forget. And that’s what the family did when she passed away in 2007.

Until we die, we’re all going to be “under construction,” and all of us have more transformational work that needs to take place in our lives. No one should ever think they have arrived in the Christian life. None of us is perfect, and God will continue his sanctifying work until we see Him face to face in heaven. Perseverance is the key.

III. Follow the Example of Others.

“Let us live up to what we’ve already attained. And join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do” (Phil. 3:16,17). As a rabbi Paul was very familiar with the idea of a disciple, or an apprentice, who sought to learn from someone older and more advanced on the journey of life and faith, and he appealed to the Christians in Philippi to learn from the example of others and to imitate their way of life.

The Louvre in Paris is perhaps the most famous art museum in the world, and it displays original paintings by masters such as Michelangelo, da Vinci, Monet, Rembrandt, and many others. Since 1793, the Louvre has encouraged aspiring artists to come and copy the masters. Some of our most famous modern artists have done that and have become better painters in their own right by copying the best artists the world has ever known.

An article in the *Smithsonian* magazine tells about a man named Amal Dagher. He’s a 63-year-old, and he’s been duplicating art at the Louvre for over 30 years. Dagher remains in awe of the masters and he continues to learn from them. He once said, "If you're too satisfied with yourself, you can't improve." Like the Louvre copyists, we'll never reach perfection before we get to heaven. Even so, we must resist the temptation to be satisfied with our present imitation of Jesus. We need to keep looking to the example of others to help point us the way to live for Christ.¹

When I was in college I learned how to do an impersonation of Billy Graham. I was a lot of fun to do it, and I usually made people laugh. But as I got older and became a pastor, I not only wanted to just do an impersonation of Dr. Graham, I also wanted to follow his example of Christian leadership, and I sought to emulate his way of life. I read just about every book he’s written and also every biography that’s been written about him too. I’ve listened to many of his sermons, and I’ve talked to people who knew him. Billy’s life and ministry was an example I wanted to follow.

There are many people who have been models and mentors to me. Some of them I've known personally, and others I've only learned about from a distance. But in each instance I saw in these people something I admired, and I tried to follow their example as they followed Christ. That's what Paul encouraged his readers to do here.

Who are your heroes in the faith? Who are you trying to pattern your life after? Do you have any mentors and models who serve as guides to you? If not, pray that God will raise up people you can look to who will point you to Jesus. There is great benefit in modeling one's life after people who are mature in their faith, and you and I would do well to study the lives of godly people and try to emulate them.

IV. Set Your Sights on Heaven.

Every runner competes to win a prize, and they set their sights on that goal to serve as a motivation to persevere and to run with all their might. Emil Zatopek wanted to win the two gold medals, and he diligently trained to accomplish that goal. Paul concludes this passage by encouraging his readers to set their sights not on a gold medal but on heaven and on Jesus Christ the Lord of heaven, and he urged them to allow these things to serve as their ultimate motivation to persevere. Paul writes, *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform [us]"* (Phil. 3:20,21).

Here the apostle points to the prize for which every believer should reach – the prize of Jesus Christ and the heavenly reward that awaits those who know and love and follow Him. He reminds his readers that even though they lived here on earth and they thought of their citizenship primarily as being in Philippi, which was a Roman colony, their real citizenship was in heaven, and their highest loyalty was to Jesus Christ. *He* is the prize, and by setting their sights on Christ and on heaven, it would help them endure whatever hardship and suffering they had to face as followers of the Savior here on earth.

Since my wife Lorie died, I have never thought about heaven as much as I have the last 2 years, and it's never been more real or more important to me than it is right now. The thought of heaven and being reunited with the ones I love serves as a great motivation in my life today, and I realize that this world is only a training ground that God has made to prepare me for the greater world that is to come.

Living my life in the light of eternity allows me to see everything that happens, in my life and in this world, through the lens of heaven. It helps me right-size the big and small events of my life, the tragic and the happy ones, and to be able to see them from the perspective of eternity. God isn't finished writing my story yet, and He isn't finished writing yours either. And the Lord wants to take whatever hardship you're facing right now and use it to cause you to look to Him and to

depend on Christ perhaps in a new way than you ever have before.

Ken Gire writes, "There will come a time when each and everyone one of us will look on our lives from the vantage point of eternity and see that our entire lifetime was just a moment to God, a mere breath. So was our suffering. Then we will look on the rewards that have been stored up for us, rewards for faithfulness as stewards of the heavy load of suffering that was entrusted to us. And we will be startled to see that the exchange rate of heaven isn't measured out to us pound for pound, because the thumb of a generous God is on those scales, weighting them in our favor."²

Keeping your sights on the prize of Christ and the amazing promise of heaven should motivate you and me to keep on keeping on. It did the apostle Paul, and it can for us as well.

Conclusion.

I began my sermon by telling you about Emil Zatopek who won gold medals in both the 5,000- and 10,000-meter races at the 1952 Olympics. What I didn't tell you was that to the surprise of everyone, Zatopek had also secretly registered to run in the marathon just a few days after his other victories. To capture all three events in a single Olympic was unthinkable. Sports writers called it "the impossible triple slam." Jim Peters of Great Britain, who was favored to win the marathon, was asked what his strategy would be to defeat Zatopek. He replied, "I will run him into the ground with a fast pace."

When the race began, it wasn't long before Peters and Zatopek left the rest of the field, and it became a two-person race. About the 10-mile mark, Zatopek edged up alongside Peters and said in broken English, "Pace too fast." Peters responded by saying, "No. The pace is too slow!" and he pushed ahead of Zatopek. At about the 15-mile mark, Zatopek once again pulled up alongside Peters and said again, "Pace too fast." Peters once again replied, "No. Pace is too slow!" and he pulled ahead. At then at the 21-mile mark, Zatopek once again pulled up beside Peters and said, "Pace too fast," to which Peters once again replied, "No. The pace is too slow." But this time Zatopek answered, "You're right!" and he ran ahead of Peters and went on to win the Gold Medal and set an Olympic Record as well. The only way Emil Zatopek could have accomplished the impossible triple slam was to forget what laid behind him and to press on to what lay ahead.

Paul's point in this passage is that a mature spiritual outlook is impossible if the tension between what God has already done and what He will yet do in Christ is destroyed. And Paul says that an extreme form of this error produces not believers but "enemies of Christ." They don't take seriously enough the need to strive toward the final goal to which God has called his people.

However, as we try to incorporate this perspective, we should also avoid the other error – that of thinking that human achievement is somehow needed for our salvation. All of our growth in Christ is the result of His Holy Spirit working in us, and we look to Him to bring to completion the good work He began in us. Believers must not rest on past successes, but they must earnestly strive to take hold of the One who has already taken hold of them. We are to love Him who first loved us – Jesus Christ, the source of our joy and strength. Amen.

¹ Adapted from Dave Egner, *Our Daily Bread*, November 10, 2003.

² Ken Gire, *The North Face of God*, pp. 60-61.