

## **Focused on the Goal – Philippians 3:4b-14 – October 8, 2017**

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The past few weeks we've been looking at the letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. Paul had a warm, loving relationship with this congregation, and he wanted only the best for them. Paul was concerned because the Philippians were the recipients of false teachings, and in his letter, he wanted to make sure they received the truth. Christianity was a new religion. As we know it had its basis in Judaism. Jesus and his followers were Jews. Their scripture, their holy book consisted of what we know as the Old Testament. There was no New Testament. The early Christian church grew out of Jewish roots.

Now Paul had been traveling throughout the empire and was reaching out to Gentiles, people who were not Jews. By professing faith in Jesus Christ and being baptized in his name, they became members of the church. But there were some Jewish Christians who believed that the Gentiles must also follow the Law of Judaism in order to become Christians. One requirement was that males should be circumcised, because that is a law for the Jews.

Paul was adamantly opposed to this teaching. Requiring new converts or any Christians to adhere to the full Jewish law completely negated the idea that salvation comes from faith in Jesus Christ alone. Following the law, doing works of righteousness won't save anybody. Only faith in Christ is the means to salvation.

At the beginning of our passage for today, Paul recites an entire laundry list to prove his Jewish-ness. If anyone could claim to be a righteous Jew, Paul was first in line. He lists his pedigree, his heritage, and his adherence to following the Law. He was in fact a Pharisee, a sect of the Jewish faith that was strict in its observance of the Jewish Law. His righteousness was not an issue. And most of all, he was such a zealot for Judaism that he had persecuted the early Christian church.

If anyone had the right to argue for having new gentile converts conform to the Jewish Law, that person would be Paul. But all that meant nothing in his conversion to Christianity, and he refused to allow others to claim that it was necessary to follow Jewish law in order to become a Christian.

As a Jew, Paul had led an exemplary life – he was highly regarded, had a title, and was well off. Yet now as a Christian, Paul chose to trade all of that in order to be follow the path of Jesus Christ. This new life, said Paul, could not compare with anything that came before. Based on his life with Christ, nothing that came before had any meaning for him. He was now on a new path, a new journey. He makes a point to mention here in the passage that he hasn't yet arrived. It's an ongoing process, one that he pursues with determination and effort.

This is not the kind of journey where one can sit back and passively take it all in. Paul describes this journey with active verbs – words that, in the Greek language, evoke an image of a lover pursuing his beloved. It's a pursuit, in which he presses on toward what he calls the prize, the heavenly call of

Christ. He strives toward the goal. He doesn't saunter, or stroll, or wander aimlessly. He keeps his eyes focused on what is ahead of him, forgets what came before, and he strains forward in pursuit of the goal, the goal of being one with Christ. He longs for oneness with Christ and for his will to be united with the will of God.

If we know that following the way of Jesus Christ is what we as Christians are called to do, why do we find ourselves so often off track? If Paul sees this journey as an active way of life, why do we sometimes view our Christian walk as a stroll through the park? I can come up with four reasons we lose sight of the goal – four ways that our focus gets shifted from what is really important. I call these the 4 D's – distortions, diversions, dead ends and distractions.

First there are **distortions**. This is what the Philippian church was experiencing. People were saying that gentiles had to follow Jewish law in order to be a Christian. The truth was distorted. It wasn't clear. People were introducing false teachings that conflicted with what Paul had taught them and that caused confusion among them. This can happen to us as well. We get sucked into believing things that distort the message of Christ. It may not be as extreme as getting sucked into some hate group that claims "God hates fags," which clearly goes against God's message of love for all humankind. But it doesn't always take much to lead us astray.

If we listen to or read items without a discerning mind, we can fall prey to false teachings. This is why it is so important for us to study and ask questions. If something doesn't sound quite right, then it probably isn't. These distortions that occur in the media or on the internet or on a radio talk show can blur our focus and keep us from the goal of following Christ.

A second hindrance to focusing on the goal is **diversions**. We stop focusing on the goal because something else gets in the way. Something becomes more important to us. Our focus can be diverted by any number of things, including relationships, our jobs, and our hobbies and interests. For Paul, Christ was everything. He was able to focus on the goal, because everything else in life was secondary.

Sometimes people or relationships get in the way. Are your actions based upon what someone else expects or wants from you? Are you controlled by your interpersonal connections? Or perhaps your job provides a diversion. Does your work conflict with your Christian beliefs? Would you be willing to forfeit your job if you were faced with an ethical dilemma? Or consider what you do in your free time. Are your interests complimentary to your life as a follower of Christ, or are they a diversion? To Paul, focusing on the goal takes place 24/7, not just a few hours on a Sunday morning.

Another way we lose our focus is when we hit a **dead end**. Occasionally we run into stumbling blocks in our pursuit of the goal of following Jesus Christ. Oftentimes these take the form of crises in our life. Illness, death, or any type of loss can slam on the brakes of our faith journey, and we face a dead end. When we experience upheaval in our lives, we may experience a variety of feelings toward

God. We may be angry or frustrated. We want to know - why did this happen to me? In some cases, we might even turn away from God. Sometimes this break in our relationship with God can go on for many years, or even a lifetime. Anger can turn to apathy. With a dead end, we lose focus on the goal because it no longer matters to us.

A final way we lose our focus is by **distractions**. Distractions mainly take the form of everyday life in this world we call our home. Our Christian journey does not fall easily into life as we know it. In a society that focus so much on self, it is hard to continue on our journey of faith which calls us to look outward, beyond ourselves. We get sidetracked by materialism, consumerism, politics, entertainment – all of these distracting us from focusing on the goal. The news media and current events are strong forces of distraction. There are many situations in our world that weigh heavily on our minds.

We may worry about tense global relationships – North Korea and Iran. We are disheartened by yet another act of gun violence in Las Vegas and feel like the problems around these types of acts will never be solved. We see the devastating impact of major weather events and natural disasters, and wonder if climate change is affecting our world more rapidly than expected. These concerns and others like them, may cause us to focus on our anger or our fear or our frustration. We are distracted. We wonder about our futures, or the future of this country, or how the world may be for our children and grandchildren. A natural response to these concerns is to hunker down, focus inward, and wait to see what happens. But that type of response distracts us from pursuing our goal. If we focus inward, we cannot also focus on Christ.

A pastor friend of mine made this observation - throughout the Bible God was most active and available to the people of Israel during times of crisis and concern. It was during those times that God reiterated God's promises. When things looked bleak, God was always there to pull the people through. That didn't mean things would be easy, but the people could always have hope because God's promises are sure. For us then, in this any time of crisis, our hope should be on God, relying on the strength and certainty of God's promises for us.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages the church to strive toward the goal of knowing and following Jesus Christ. Christ is to be our focus, the focus of everything we do and say. We are embarked on an active journey that continues throughout our life, a journey which began the moment we were baptized. The path ahead of us is not an easy one and there will be stumbling blocks along the way – distortions of truth, diversions that tempt us to change our focus, dead ends that keep us from moving forward, and distractions from the world around us.

But Paul persuades us to put everything else aside, to strain forward toward Christ. When the journey becomes difficult, we can rely on the trustworthiness of God's promises to us. We are to push on, ever seeking to keep our focus on the goal, the prize ahead of us. And that prize is Christ Jesus.

The path is before us. Let us move forward together on this journey toward Christ.