

Philippians 3:8-14

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, 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—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Dear Christians,

Have you had to make big decisions in your life? I'm sure that you all have had to do this at some point. One of "big decisions", that I had to make in my life was when I received the Call from St. Luke's to serve as the second Pastor here in Watertown. At that time, I was serving as the Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC, and on top of that I had also just received a call to serve as pastor of Hope Lutheran Church in St. Charles, MI. so I was actually holding three calls at the same time. I remember those days like they happened just yesterday – in fact I spoke with some of you directly on the phone as you shared your thoughts with me. There were also lots of people who talked with me during this time of deliberation --several of my neighboring pastors talked with me, family members weighed in, and I spoke with several people in my congregation. Every one of those conversations was helpful, appreciated and very important. But just about each of you admitted that your comments were somewhat biased. But I remember talking to one of my neighboring pastors who I respected very much. He asked me all the details of the call and then we evaluated – and he said something that reminded me of our text today. He said – it really depends what your goal is – on what basis you'll be making this decision. Those thoughts really led me see the big picture. It helped me to clear out some of the things that weren't so important and brought the main focus to the front.

And that's what our text is about. Look at this reading from Philippians and you'll see some of the thoughts that were running through my head. This text, really, provides a wonderful decision making matrix for a Christian. Paul tells us to keep the goal in mind – to "Press on toward the goal" in everything – forgetting what doesn't matter and focusing on what does. So why did I decide to come to St. Luke's in Watertown? Because I feel that here, God is giving me so many opportunities to put that eternal goal -- that prize in front of those who don't see it or are distracted from it, and even more, he's using me to train you to do the same. That's what it is all about:

Theme: Press On To The Goal!

- 1. Forget what doesn't matter**
- 2. Focus on what does**

Paul says that we "Press On To The Goal" by putting out of our minds the things that don't matter. Like a sprinter wouldn't think of looking back in the middle of the race or a basketball player dare not look in the stands as he's shooting a free throw – Paul says not to get distracted. How? Realize what those distractions are and realize what is truly important in life.

In this chapter Paul had been defending against those false teachers that were trying to draw believers away by touting their credentials. They were confident that they were living the life God wanted and they were worth listening to. This is where Paul gave his list of all the reasons he would have had for pride and confidence if it were about the flesh, all about this life. Listen as he describes his life, **“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” (Philippians 3:4-6)** He was a purebred Benjamite, had followed all those extra rules as a Pharisee, and had been a more zealous Pharisee than any other. But then he says this: **“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” (Philippians 3:7)** Then our text says – **“What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, (literally dung...I consider them gross) that I may gain Christ...”**

Think of what a complete change of mind that is from the normal. He wasn't proud of his accomplishments, because he knew they had nothing to do with what really mattered, his standing with Christ. That's why he said he forgot about those things and rather focus on this fact, **“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—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”**

Do you understand what Paul is trying to say? It would be like me standing up and saying, I am going to be saved because of what I have accomplished in my life. I was born into a family that was dedicated to serving Jesus, my Grandpa was a pastor, and both my mom and dad and my two brothers and sister are all Christian Day School teachers. I was baptized in the first week of my life. I attended a Christian Day School from Kindergarten through 8th Grade. I was confirmed and then went to Northwestern Prep to study to be a pastor. Following that, I went to Northwestern College and then studied four more years at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to be a Pastor, and I have been a Pastor for 22 years. I think with a life like this I should be at the top of God's list to be saved. But like Paul, I would emphatically say that I consider all of these things I just listed as dung or rubbish compared to knowing Jesus as my Savior from sin.

So let's ask the big questions: Who are you? What really matters about you? Do people know you as a hard worker, a great salesperson, or a wonderful teacher? A faithful husband? A beautiful wife? A good coach? A great parent? Even a dedicated volunteer or powerful church worker... As nice as all those things are, as good as all those things are – when it comes to what really matters – when it comes to who you truly are - Paul uses the picture of what you have to pick up after your dog to describe every single one of the titles I just listed.

Or how about this question: What do you live for? We know there's a problem if our answer is our job or sports or the stuff of this world. Do you live for the good things of this world? Dave Ramsey a renowned Christian financial planner says that the new status symbol is the paid off home mortgage. What a wonderful thing to think about! Or maybe you live for your picture perfect family, or your volunteerism? Good things, right? But when we're following Paul's decision making matrix – even they are what he describes as things that are to be “left behind”, even they are loss compared to the goal. All our accomplishments, all our achievements are nothing because they are things that are part of our own righteousness. Paul says we should all want, **“the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ.”** We want the real righteousness, the one that is through faith in Christ – the one given, not earned. So all things are a loss in comparison that this.

2. Focus on what does matter

Can we say with Paul – “I want to know Christ more than anything else”? Realize what that is saying. If we agree with Paul today, we are destroying just about every excuse you've ever come up with for skipping a Bible Study or devotion or worship opportunity. If my accomplishments in athletics or the opportunities I want to give my kids are dung compared to growing closer to my Savior; if the promotion

or the overtime at work truly makes me feel ill if it gets in the way of God's Word, if extra sleep is like the insides of a smelly diaper – and we mean what we say – our lives need to see some changes. We have lived for what is behind more than pressing on toward the goal.

“But come on, pastor, this is just too extreme, right? We've got to live, right?” Yes. It is extreme, but so is what the Bible says. In our Old Testament lesson God said that the rescue from Egypt and the miracle of the Red Sea – that event that changed the entire Israelite worldview from one of slavery to the world power that God made them. That miracle, God said, was nothing compared with what we're talking about today. Try telling that to someone standing at the shores of that Red Sea with the adrenaline rush of their fear overcome by overwhelming victory. That is nothing, because God has something better.

Every moment of every day, you are making decisions. Apply God's decision making matrix. As crazy as it sounds – forget what is behind, including all your previous sins of bad decisions – Forget them because God made a decision, based on His love and he sent His Son. Forget them because, as Paul says, **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”**

How is it possible to make decisions that are this extreme and so extremely contrary to the way of the world we live in? It would take a paradigm-shifting miracle greater than the one God performed with the water of the Red Sea. Here it is. In fact, almost everyone here has witnessed this miracle firsthand, but most of you don't even remember it. God takes a sinful child of this world and makes him a child of heaven through Baptism. With water more powerful than the crashing walls of the Red Sea, he crushed sin and destroyed Satan's power over us. He claimed you and me with His water and the Word and put all that other stuff behind – and gave you the prize, the goal. So act like it, Paul says. **“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. 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.”** Focus on the prize, the goal.

What makes this so difficult is the distractions of the Devil, the World and our Sinful Flesh. I enjoy watching basketball games, and if you watch basketball games you know what I am talking about with distractions especially on free throws. What do almost all the fans do when an opposing player is shooting his free throws? They scream, wave things behind the basket, jump up and down and even dress in funny looking outfits all with the intention of distracting the shooter, and all too often it works as the shooter misses the shot. Even though the world waves its distractions more than the opposing team's fans during a free throw – you are here to press on toward that goal – knowing Christ more and more and the power of His resurrection. That means that we live without the guilt of our failures. They are “behind”. Jesus died for them, and Jesus rose to prove it – and now he connects you to that miraculous act – putting perfection in front of you.

What a blessing as we can come to the Lord's Supper, where you get a foretaste of what is in front of you, His body and blood he used to pay the price to eat and drink – to make a part of you - to assure you of who you are and that the goal is yours. What a blessing that you've been baptized so that, like Paul wrote – **“we were buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”** And Paul also tells us, **“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.”** That is the crown. That is the prize. Like Paul says in our text – it's not about my striving perfectly – but it is about knowing Christ and knowing what he has in store for me – I can't help but keep straining toward it.

So with that motivation – make all your decisions. So what do you think? Do we always make the right decisions? In the end it doesn't really matter? That is behind. We're here together to press on toward the goal of heaven as forgiven children of God who trust 100% in the work of Jesus. Let's keep that promise in our focus and together – press on toward the goal. In Christ, Amen