

## Sermon for April 7, 2019 “Eyes On The Prize”

Philippians 3:4b-14

Sometimes we misunderstand things. We see or hear something and we think we know what's going on, but then we discover that we have everything backwards. Let me give an example.

Once there was a man with exceptional church attendance. He was 105 years old and had hardly ever missed a service at church. Shortly after his 105<sup>th</sup> birthday he missed several Sunday and his church family became concerned. So the preacher went to visit him to see what was wrong. The man gladly explained himself. He said, “When I turned 90 I thought the Lord would come get me any day. Then I turned 95, then 100, then recently 105, and he still hasn't gotten me. I figure maybe he has forgotten me. I figure if I lay low and stay under his radar. If he has forgotten me maybe I should be careful not to remind him.”

Perhaps this guy had heard that by going to church you can know God. Maybe he took that seriously. And he was afraid of literally meeting his maker.

Paul the apostle said to the Philippians, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Most people hear this and they misunderstand it. They think that Paul is saying that if we strive more we can reach Christ. Or in other words that the merit of our good works gets us closer to God, but if you look at the context of the verses leading up to this, the point is quite the opposite.

Let's start at the beginning of the passage. Paul said, “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.” If anyone could be saved by being a religious person, it was Paul. He was born into a religious family, he had a religious upbringing and he was trained religiously. He also lived a life of someone who was very zealous about their religious.

Paul kept all the laws and did all the right things. Yet he says, “whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” He goes on, “More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul is saying forget all those credentials of a religious person. They are nothing when it comes to knowing Christ.

Let's put this into perspective. Paul had been a very strong believer in God. This belief led him to persecute the early Christians. But then in his pursuit to do God's will, Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and turned him around. After that he stopped persecuting the Christians, and instead preached Christ. And he spent the rest of his life on the road spreading the Gospel. He was beaten and imprisoned and shipwrecked and even stoned and left for dead once.

Paul is saying that all that adds up to 0% of his salvation, where as faith in Jesus makes up the other 100%. After all it is Paul who said, “Salvation is by grace through faith.” Now we Methodists like to talk about grace. We have prevenient grace, and justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. We even have Amazing Grace. Did you know that Grace is the most popular name for a United Methodist Church? But too often Christians are under the mistaken impression that our works still play a role in our salvation. I think it is because we misunderstand the nature of God's righteousness and our righteousness.

It's really mathematical. Let's say we have a scale of righteousness. The most righteous person who ever lived might be a 1 million on the scale. The most despicable mass murderer is a 0. We might compare ourselves to them and say "Well I am far from 0, not quite a million, but I am above average." But we are serving an infinite God. Mathematically speaking 1 million is just as far from infinity as 0 is. It is humanly impossible to reach God with our righteousness. That is why God reached down to us with through Jesus.

That's why Paul counts all his religious activity as loss for Christ. Paul said, "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, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." Paul's goal is to be in Christ. He tried to find salvation doing all the right things. It led him to persecution and murder of God's people. The only thing that saved him was faith in Christ.

Paul's righteousness is not based on his own works. It is based on faith in Jesus. It is righteousness not from his own keeping of the law or his own actions but a gift from God. That gift is then received by faith.

It's like someone who has fallen into a hole. The sides of the hole are too steep to crawl out of. The person is trapped there. But if someone outside the hole were to reach down they could pull them out. The whole human race is in a hole of sin, and we are not able to climb out of it. In Jesus, God reached down to pull us out. But we need to take Jesus' hand – that is faith.

So why does Paul talk about pressing on toward the goal? It is a question of what the goal is. The goal is not heaven. Paul says "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." Heaven is already promised because of Jesus Christ. The goal is the "heavenly call" of God in Jesus Christ. It's the call to follow Christ.

So yes, we should strive to do the right things and serve God. But we are not striving for the prize of salvation. That prize has already been won. The prize Paul is striving for is to now live as much like Christ as he can.

When I was in high school I was a band geek. Our band had come in second in the state competitions for almost a decade. But my Jr. year we finally won the championship. After they announced it our drum major went forward to receive the trophy, and she brought it back to us and we all celebrated there on the field. Our parents came down to the field and I remember struggling through the crowd to find them so that I could hug them and celebrate with them. The trophy had already been won. I was struggling to embrace those who would celebrate the win with me.

The trophy of Eternal Life has already been won. Now we press forward. We press forward to embrace the one who won it for us. We press on to live a life which is in line with the calling of God in Christ. If you have never put your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior do it today because he is your only hope. And if he is your Savior then seek to live for Christ as Paul did.