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Running Hard in the Right Direction
Philippians 3:12-21
November 13, 2016, Jeff Germo

I don't know what your feeling is as we have been going through this study of Philippians and what you think of the Apostle Paul. For me, I see someone who is very protective of the church. He so loves the church in Philippi and he is going to do everything in his power to make sure nobody brings unhealthy legalism into the church to destroy the freedom that Christ died for. Have you ever seen a mother cat protecting her kittens? Watch this video.¹

[2 - Video]

That is how Paul protects the church. You get the idea that he doesn't care how powerful these people think they are. He will not allow them to infiltrate the church with their twisted, overly religious thinking.

In the passage that Pastor Steve preached from last week, the Apostle Paul continued on with a very stern warning to the church to be careful of those kinds of people who think their own efforts and achievements will somehow make them more right with God than others. Paul went on to say how, if that were the case, because of his perfect religious pedigree, he, much more than those others, would be ahead of the game. He goes on to say this:

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Philippians 3:7–9 (NLT)

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

What does Paul say is the most important thing, above everything else? Knowing Jesus. He says all those other things are worthless compared to knowing Jesus. He goes even further. He says, he counts all his past religious efforts as garbage. And actually the Greek word he uses, *skubalon*, is much more graphic than "garbage". The word is 'refuse', or 'dung', 'manure', 'excrement'.

He's not saying we shouldn't put any effort into knowing the Bible and Christian doctrine and living righteously. He doesn't discard those things. **What he discards is the idea that those things somehow make us any more righteous**, or that God will love us more if we do them, or love us less if we don't. That is the context from last week.

Let's continue on with the next passage. There is way too much content to cover everything in this passage, but we will focus on the main points along the way.

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Philippians 3:12–21 (NLT)

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3eMsW3dYEU>

¹² I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

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¹⁵ Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. ¹⁶ But we must hold on to the progress we have already made. ¹⁷ Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example.

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¹⁸ For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth.

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²⁰ But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. ²¹ He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.

On October 25, 1964 Jim Marshall, who played for the Minnesota Vikings in the NFL, made what is considered by many to be one of *the* most embarrassing plays in professional sports history. In a game against the San Francisco 49ers, Marshall recovered a fumble, and ran 66 yards for a touchdown -- the wrong way. He was disoriented when he picked up the ball and actually ran 66 yards with his own team mates running after him trying desperately to catch him. Once in the end zone he celebrated by throwing the ball away out of bounds resulting in a safety for the 49ers. Watch this video clip of that play.²

[8 - Video]

He was so sure that he was running in the right direction. He excitedly ran towards the end zone, probably wondering why no one was chasing him down, other than his own team mates trying to stop him.

Now, in the big scheme of things, that sort of mistake is pretty small. It's embarrassing, but it's not the end of the world. If he had a good sense of humour and some healthy humility, he probably got over it -- a few decades later. As a matter of fact, I've watched interviews with him talking about that day, and as embarrassing as it was for him, he said it was crucial that he got back in the game and kept playing. Even though he has had to carry the nickname, "Wrong Way Marshall," he didn't let it destroy his life. In the big scheme of things, a mistake like that is not such a big deal. It was just one event. Now, if he had decided to make running the wrong way a way of life, that would be another story.

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I wonder, if I asked for a show of hands as to whether you feel like you have wasted much of your life by chasing after the wrong things, how many of you would raise your hands? The

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1UZy7SSdDI>

older you are, the harder it would be to face that truth. If you have a “Damascus Road” experience like the Apostle Paul had when he met the risen Jesus and realized he had wasted his life working against Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If you have a life changing experience like that when you are twenty, it would be much easier to accept it and make a mid-course correction than if you were in the latter part of your life.

I’m not sure how old Paul was at that time, but I would assume he was middle aged or close to it since he had a position of authority. At the moment he had his encounter with Jesus, he had to face the fact that he had previously been going in the wrong direction. All his energies, his time, his passions, his pursuits, everything had been a waste of time. I can imagine he would have had a difficult time processing all that.

The older you are, the harder it would be to face. It wasn’t too many years ago I realized that truth about myself. I was already in full-time ministry when I was faced with the shocking truth that I had totally missed the point of, not only God’s call on *my* life, but I had completely missed the point of life. I was passionate about what I thought was my call from God. I don’t think I got it all wrong. I had some good mixed in with the bad self-centred motives, but, even the many good things I did were done so I would feel good about myself. I was so blind to the collateral damage I left in the wake of my passionate pursuit of truth at the expense of everything else that I didn’t realize the people I was hurting in the process.

My so-called “call” came from an insecure sense of self instead of a secure sense of who I was in Christ. I passionately ran hard in the wrong direction. It’s not that I was doing all the wrong things. I was doing many right things, but for the wrong reasons. **I didn’t understand that God wanted to transform my character through my relationship with Jesus.** As I began to understand this I started to give the Holy Spirit permission to reveal flaws in my character that got in the way of my relationships. I had to make a mod-course correction. It was a very painful time in my life.

When Ruthie and I were in Quebec City just one month ago, the Lord showed me very powerfully that there are some ways I have responded to her that have hindered our relationship. We had been having such a good time together for the week we were there, once I finally allowed myself to stop thinking about ministry so I could relax.

We were out for lunch in the Old City. Ruthie said something to me that I took offence at. It wasn’t anything bad or hurtful, but for some reason, I got sensitive about it and let it hurt me. **The crazy thing is that, while I was feeling hurt, I actually knew I was in the wrong.** Yet I continued to let it hurt me even though she had no intention of hurting me in any way. Now, the fact that I was aware of it actually showed a lot of growth because a few years ago I would not have even known I was in the wrong. It had been a huge blind spot for me. There has been a lot of growth, but not enough.

We left the restaurant and I was feeling bad about how I had responded to her. The Holy Spirit was speaking to me, prodding me to make it right. **I was cut to the heart that, after almost thirty years of marriage I would still act like that.** I apologized asked her to forgive me and told her that she never deserves to be treated that way, and let her know I wanted to change, and asked for her help.

Here's the deal. In the early days of my life as a Christian and even while I was in ministry I was running hard in the wrong direction. I thought it was enough to learn more about God, to gather more theological insight and be well versed in Christian doctrine. When Jesus opened my eyes to what he wanted to do in my heart and life, I started to give him permission to show me those things that offend him and others and get in the way of relationship. At first it was extremely difficult because my pride got in the way. I had to humble myself and admit that, after all those years, I was running hard in the wrong direction.

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Running hard in the wrong direction is dangerous.

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Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome:

Romans 10:1-2 (NLT)

¹Dear brothers and sisters, the longing of my heart and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved. ²I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal.

So, Paul said the Judaizers of his day were very zealous, with good intentions even, but he said, they were zealous about the wrong things. And their zeal led them to destruction. How many of you have heard people say things like, it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere? That kind of relativistic thinking is the most dangerous advice you could ever give someone because our belief does not change truth...no matter how passionately we believe it. It is vitally important that we believe the right things and go hard after goals that are ultimately good for us and give glory to God. It matters what you believe.

Let's walk through this passage and see what Paul has to say.

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¹²I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection.

What things does Paul say that he has yet to achieve? If you read the preceding verses you will see that he is talking about the righteousness of Christ. Now, we've talked about this in previous sermons. In one sense, Paul says in many of his writings, we *are* righteous – that is in regards to our standing with God – or, as it pertains to our salvation. Paul talks about this in Romans chapter 3.

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Romans 3:22-24 (NLT)

²²We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. ²³For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. ²⁴Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.

So, on the one hand, if you have trusted in the finished work of Jesus on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins, you are righteous before God. **He paid the penalty that you and I deserved so we could be free from the eternal consequence of sin and have a**

relationship with him. That is our position, or our standing before God. We are made righteous. We have been justified before God, not because of anything we did or can do, but because of God's grace.

On the other hand though, as you can see in verse 23, we are all sinners. ²³ ***For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*** We have not yet arrived. And Paul talks about this in chapter seven of Romans. **He talks about his own intense struggle with sin.** In his own strength he cannot do the things that he knows he should do. And he talks about the fact that there are two powers at work in the follower of Jesus. There is the old sin nature, and there is the new nature in Jesus.

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And so Paul, in Philippians, says that as far as his own spiritual perfection, or maturity goes, he has not yet arrived. He was in process. Twice he says he has not yet achieved that kind of perfection. His standing before God is secure, but down here on earth, as far as his ability to love God and people the way God intends him to, there is more work to do.

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So, he says, ***...I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*** ¹³ ***No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,*** ¹⁴ ***I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.***

Paul was a sport enthusiast. He was likely not an athlete, but if he were alive today, I believe with all my heart that he would very keenly follow the Calgary Flames. Well, maybe not, but he would certainly follow the Olympics. Many times in his writings he used various illustrations from Olympic sport.

And here in Philippians he uses an illustration from a running race. Twice he says ***"I press on..."***

This Greek word for 'press on' is ***dioko***. It means to purposefully set in motion, or to strive for, or to run hard and fast after a goal. And in verse 13 he says, ***"I focus on this one thing."*** He is very purposeful about achieving something here. He is single-minded. He knows what he wants, and he is going to discipline himself so he can achieve it. What's his focus on? What does he want to achieve? What is so important that he is willing to focus all his time, energy and resources to achieve it?

"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past..."

Paul had spent most of his life focused on the wrong thing. He had actually worked against Jesus. His whole life had been about trying to destroy the church and persecuting followers of Jesus.

In the first week I was at CRBC I met with someone who said they were trying to decide if they would stay at CRBC and help destroy it, or if they should go to another church and help build it up. I told him that I thought God was calling him to help that other church.

The thing about Paul (Saul at that time) was that he didn't think he was doing anything wrong. He had good intentions. He thought he was the hand of God. When he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus everything changed.

I would imagine that would have been a huge struggle for him. He could easily have let the fact that he had wasted the first half of his life paralyze him so he couldn't move forward. Had he done that he would have remained immature and defeated. So he says, "No, I am going to learn from the past, but I'm not going to let it define me or defeat me. I'm not going to let it paralyze me."

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Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17,

7 ...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

[17]

Learn from the past, but don't let it defeat you. Don't let it paralyze you. "Your old life is gone; a new life has begun."

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Paul says, "***I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead...***" The Greek word translated, "looking forward to" here actually carries a stronger meaning than how the NLT translates it. Most of your Bibles likely say something like, "***Straining towards...***" The imagery is just like the picture on the screen. You've all seen athletes in the 100 metre race stretching towards the finish line. They have one focus and every ounce of energy is straining towards the goal to win the race. That is how Paul says he is living his life. — But, again, what is so important that he would strain so hard to achieve?

In verse 14 he says, ***14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.***

Again this is sporting imagery. Just like an Olympic athlete will give everything they have to ***train for the chance to stand on the podium and receive a medal***, he said there is something worth giving everything for. ***There is something so valuable and so satisfying that it is worth a single minded focus.***

This isn't the only passage where Paul talks about this kind of single-minded training. We looked at some of these passages a couple weeks ago, so I'm not going to read them again. But, over and over again in Paul's letters, he talks about purposefully training ourselves, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.

So, what's so valuable that it is worth so much effort? What does Paul say he is focusing on, in all of these passages about training and pressing on and running the race? The answer is godliness, Christ-likeness, that we would look more and more like Jesus all the time so when others look at us they would see Jesus and be attracted to him. It's worth all our energy, all our time, and all our resources. That is why we are here as a church.

Here is what Paul wrote to the church in Colossians:

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Colossians 1:28–29 (NLT)

28 So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect [telios - complete/mature] in their relationship to Christ. 29 That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.

Here's the question for us this morning:

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Are you putting the appropriate amount of time, energy and resources, depending on Christ's power in you, into training for godliness?

Sometimes we get so busy and are in such a hurry that we totally miss the important things in life. Some people say, "Work hard, play hard." But, are you working hard for the right things? What are you so busy about? What kinds of things fill your mind and your time? Are they the important things?

When you look back on 2016 can you honestly say that you are more like Jesus today on November 13th, 2016 than you were last year at this time?

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If you keep yourself so busy that you don't have time to regularly **spend in God's Word** asking Jesus to teach and train you, you are just too busy. Something has to change. **It's good to be busy, but it is counterproductive to be too busy.** And, it is downright dangerous to be busy doing the wrong things.

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This is the very reason we have our **Growth Groups**. We want to be purposeful about becoming the men and women God has called us to be. Jesus has given us a mission. His mandate is clear. **The job Jesus gave us is to make disciples by teaching them to obey everything he commanded us to do.**

Like Paul said, it's good to have goals to get in better physical shape, but it is much better to have as your highest goal to become like Jesus.

Let's finish up by reading the last few verses.

[23]

Philippians 3:12-21

18 For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth.

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20 But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. 21 He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.

This whole passage is about refocusing our lives. If we really are citizens of heaven, where should our focus be?

Paul says, forget the past. Look to the future. Set your sights on Jesus and allow his Spirit to do his work in you. Read, meditate, and pray through God's Word. Give the Holy Spirit permission to change your heart and mind. Get into a Growth Group, if you aren't in one yet, so you are accountable to other Jesus followers who care about you and who can help you grow. I promise, if you do that this could be the most satisfying year you have ever had.



Running Hard in the Right Direction
Philippians 3:12-21
Week of November 13, 2016

Objective of this study: To check our life focus.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.
2. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
3. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 8** meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.

Welcome

Describe an experience you have had (or one you have heard about) where GPS lead you in the wrong direction.

[It's really important when doing this study that we each think about ourselves specifically and ways we need to grow, not how Christians in general need to grow. Do the hard work of letting the Holy Spirit speak to *your* heart.]

Word (30-45 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read Phil. 3:12-21
 1. Look carefully at the passage and find all the sport imagery.
 2. In the passage, Paul says he is “**forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.**” What is he forgetting? (see 3:1-11) What is he looking forward to (or *straining towards*)?
 3. In verse 18 Paul says that there are those “**whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ.**” What conduct is Paul referring to?
 4. Contrasted to this, in verses 20 and 21, what does Paul say our focus should be?
 5. Read Colossians 3:1-17 and compare it to this passage. What does Paul say our focus should be?

Work (30-45 minutes)

1. Why is a midcourse correction difficult? What would have happened to Wrong Way Marshall if he hadn't looked past his mistake and looked forward?
2. How is humility and willingness to see our blindspots important to this process of growth Paul talks about?
3. How does pride get in the way of growth?

Sermon Quote: “So, what’s so valuable that it is worth so much effort? What does Paul say he is focusing on, in all of these passages about training and pressing on and running the race? The answer is godliness, that we would look more and more like Jesus all the time so when others look at us they would see Jesus and be attracted to him. It’s worth all our energy, all our time, and all our resources.”

4. How has the Holy Spirit spoken to you from this study? How would you like him to change you?

Sermon Quote: “Paul says, forget the past. Look to the future. Set your sights on Jesus and allow his Spirit to do his work in you. Read, meditate, and pray through God’s Word. Give the Holy Spirit permission to change your heart and mind.”