



THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Press On to the Prize

Philippians 3:12-21 (NIV)

¹² 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. ¹³ 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

It might surprise some of you to know that I go on a three mile run about 3-4 mornings a week, surprising because I don't really look it. It started about a year and a half ago when I was challenged by some congregation members to run a 5k with them. As I stuck with it and kept running, people began to ask me if I liked running. I tell them I like when I'm done.

Running for me has been more about the goal than the experience. After arriving here in Utah, I picked a running route that is kind of hard, at least for the first half. When I get going, I run east, which means that I am inevitably running uphill. As I go, my muscles strain, my feet pound on the pavement, my bodies cries, "Why did you get out of bed?!" I keep going to get to the point where uphill levels out and the other mile and a half turns into a downhill run. That's what keeps me going on the uphill portion – thinking about that point where it will level off, get easier, and give me smooth sailing to finish. I press on to the goal of an easier run.

We all have goals in life. They can be simple as making it through the day, the week, etc. They can be more complex like a 5 year plan or something to that effect. As Christians, we press on to a certain goal as well. Paul elaborates on that goal that we press on for in our Philippians reading. He himself presses on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him.

God gave Paul a goal, a goal that is meant for us as well: to know Christ, to know the power of his resurrection, to have participation in Jesus' sufferings, to become like Jesus in his death, and attain the resurrection from the dead. In short, the goal that Christ took a hold of for Paul and for us is the prize of heaven which can only be gained by being right with God. That's what Paul was pressing on towards. This is the end game for Christians, the finish line - heaven. You get there by being perfect - perfect, right here, right now. No flaws, no faults, no misdemeanors, no white lies, no mess ups, no mistakes, not even the hint of being anything less than absolute perfection.

Some religions will tell you to get perfection by completing a to-do list. They will tell you that you need to give "x" number of dollars to church or to charity. They will tell you that you need to read their materials and pray so many times in a day or week. They will tell you what processes you must go through in order to be purged from sin. All these things require a certain amount of effort on your part to get right with God in order to obtain this goal of heaven.

Even among the Philippian Christians there were a group of people who taught that truly being right with God meant cutting off a piece of skin. You had to be circumcised in order reach this goal of perfection before God so that you could go heavenward. Paul called these people "mutilators of flesh." Teaching such things, they were "enemies of the cross." They were enemies because they had their minds set on what they could do to be perfect. Pride and satisfaction in what their accomplishments instead of trusting in God, arrogance to think that they can do more than what Jesus did on the cross, that they didn't need Jesus and his payment for sin - this is why "their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things." (verse 19)

Do we ever lose sight of what being a Christian is all about? Is it all about the rules we have to follow? Do we base our value of being a Christian in what we accomplish? Is our Christian life about looking back on what we have done?

Now, it is good to look back on things we have done. To see a congregation here today as generous and friendly as you all are, thanks be to God! He has worked this in you and through you. He has blessed us and continues to do so. But what would happen to us if all we did was reflect on the past, spending our time looking backwards at what we had done?

What would happen if I went home today after service and said to myself, "Man, that was one awesome sermon." Then, next week my sermon is, "Hey, remember that awesome sermon I preached last week. That was pretty great, wasn't it?" and I proceed to play the video of it for you. I have a sneaking suspicion that not many of you would be happy with such an effort. Or what if, as a student, you study really hard and get a good grade on your test. When the next test rolls around, do you tell your teacher, "Remember how I got that 'A' before? I don't need to take this test. I've already proven myself."? I'm thinking that good grade is not going to mean much next to that "F" you just got trying to make the past count for your new test. At church, do we say, "I gave already; I don't need to give any more."? "I helped with Trunk or Treat this year; I don't have to think about volunteering for anything else"? "I donated some of the school supplies; I'm good."? "I cleaned the church; what more can you really ask of me?" After we have done a good deed, we want to step back and take credit for it, look back on what we have done, and not really think about what's next.

When a runner spends all his time looking backwards, seeing where he has been, he loses focus, loses the path, gets off course. He trips on something in front of him that he wasn't looking for. He slows down, and the goal gets forgotten. I could stop my run once it reaches the leveling out point, but instead of stopping and patting myself on the back for getting uphill, I keep running the rest of the route to get to my ultimate goal of home.

Like the runner who looks back at how far he's gone and wants to stop there, we can lose our focus on the goal that God has for us. We can become too focused on what we have done for God instead of straining forward deed after deed, action after action, always pressing on for what God has taken hold of for you and me.

There is not a quota to fill when it comes to Christian living. Instead, like Paul, we have to say about the goal of our Christian living, "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." (verse 13-14) We could step back and say, "Trunk or treat was pretty awesome," pat ourselves on the back, and then just coast for the rest of the year. We could step back in our voters' meeting today and say, "You know, we have accomplished quite a bit; let's stop here. Let's not press on; let's just be happy with what we have."

The Christian life is not about standing still and reveling in what we have done. God calls you and me to a forward focus, straining toward what is ahead, pressing on towards the prize. This new mindset comes because of what Jesus Christ has already attained for us: our citizenship in heaven. Christ has signed the papers with his blood and established us as citizens of his heavenly realm. That is our real and ultimate home, the place where we will spend eternity with him. This is where we belong. This is our end goal. That's the prize.

This is what we have already attained through Christ. He has made us perfect by taking away our sins. We are truly right with God right now because of this. This is why Paul tells us, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained." (verse 16) Perfection is ours. Christ has won it for us. We are citizens of heaven. Now, live up to it. "Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (verse 14)

This means we forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. As Christians, we want to do more. We want to reach more people with the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified who makes us right with God. As we continue to be blessed by God, I want to give to him again and again, not content to say that I have given enough. As a student, out of love for God, I press on to study harder for each and every test because God wants me to do my best. Same goes for the employee. I don't just do the bare minimum because that is what is required of me, but I work to the best of my ability because I am striving for the perfection that Christ has already attained for me. I belong to him, and that changes my outlook on life and how I approach my daily tasks of Christian living.

We press on toward the prize because our citizenship is in heaven; it is where we belong. We don't stop and look back, thinking I've done enough, I've met my quota. You and I, we press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus. Amen.