

**Tuesday, September 15, 2020**

**SERIES: GROWING AND GOING**

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**TITLE: Running for the Heavenly Prize Pt. 1**

Have you ever been to a race or a marathon? I have. It's amazing to watch runners in a race, isn't it? I find it amazing, first of all, because I hate to run. I really do. I am convinced that if God had intended for us to run, he wouldn't have allowed us to invent cars. Just saying... So yes, I hate to run. But there is something incredible about watching these athletes run. They are so dedicated – sold out to running and attaining the prize. They are focused. They are determined. They are pumped. And from the moment the gun fires, they are off running until the end.

What does running, and what do prizes, have to do with Christianity? That's exactly what we're going to talk about!

In our text today, Paul says, “; but one thing I do... ... <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:13b-14, NASB).

We, as Christians, are running in a race. Our victory is secured, but we still strive for the prize. Paul was Heavenly focused and, therefore, spiritually-minded. We, as Christians, should strive to be like Paul, and be spiritually minded. And in this text, we will discover **6 traits of a spiritually-minded believer**.

If you are visiting with us today, or haven't been here for a while, we are in a series called “Growing and Going”. We want to be Christians who don't stay spiritual babies, but instead grow up to be mature believers. And mature believers *don't* sit down on the racetrack of life. No - growing and mature believers - we go and live a life that is pleasing to God. We go, and we make disciples.

Well, over the last couple of days, we worked through Philippians 3:1-11. While looking at Paul's past, he did some accounting work. He determined his past spiritual efforts and works of the flesh were rubbish. It is not about what he or we can do to save ourselves from our sin, but what Christ has done through grace. Because of that, we can rejoice. Today we are going back to Philippians Chapter 3, beginning in verse 12 (NASB). Paul writes,

**“Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.**

Paul starts off saying, “Not that I have already obtained it.” What is “it”? We need to go back and look at the previous verses. Paul acknowledges and rejoices because he is saved – made righteous because of what Christ has done. He has already become justified. His sin debt is paid. But one thing is yet to be complete: his resurrection - the point where he becomes glorified. He

clarifies this when he says, “or already become perfect.” To be completed is to become as Christ is. He has not yet achieved this, because this won’t happen on this side of Earth, but he strives for it, and works toward it.

It is like the famous quote by **Coach Vince Lombardi**, “Gentlemen, we will chase perfection, and we will chase it relentlessly, knowing all the while we can never attain it. But along the way, we shall catch excellence.” This mindset would lead Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers to six divisional titles and five world championships. This mentality is what Paul was talking about. And this is the first trait of a spiritually-minded Christian: **They focus on growth.** This was Paul’s mindset. He wasn’t perfect. He knew until he was resurrected, he would not be complete or perfect in Christ. Yet, he “pressed on”. He *eagerly* ran after this goal of being conformed to the image of Christ. This was Jesus’ intent in saving Paul and in saving *each one of us!*

But here’s the truth: Growth doesn’t just happen. **Growth is intentional.** In John Maxwell’s book, “The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth”, Maxwell writes, “No one improves by accident. Personal growth doesn’t just happen on its own. And once you’re done with your formal education, you must take complete ownership of the growth process, because nobody else will do it for you.”

Many of us have goals in life. As we strive to achieve those goals and hit those goals, we need to go back and see if we grew because of the *experience*. Think about it: When you were in school, you could get an A without integrating that knowledge into your life. You could study, get an A, and then walk away. Unfortunately, you were no wiser with that A than without it.

The same can be true for us as Christians. Some of us will join the race; understand the race is won - we are saved. But then, what do some of us do? We sit down on the racetrack. We can’t do that - we *must* be committed to growing in our walk with God to become more like Jesus.

Peter said so much in 2 Peter 3:17-18 (ESV). Peter writes, “[You, therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.](#) <sup>18</sup> [But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.](#)”

Peter was well aware that growth results from intentionality and focus. Peter says, “don’t get carried away with the error”. And friend, I don’t think anyone wakes up in the morning and says, “I’m going to ruin my spiritual life”, or “I’m going to ruin my physical life”. Instead, what happens is, bit by bit, people drift away. Bit by bit, they’re carried away. You will never coast to growth. You will never coast to maturity. When we coast into error or complacency, we will not be growing and going. This is why you must focus on growth.

## **DISCUSSION:**

**N:** All right, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney are on hand to talk more about this. So Arnie, Peter says, “Take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability”. Give us an example of how this happens today.

**A:** You know, I can give you 10,000 examples of how this happens every day, especially if you observe people. It usually starts with someone wanting to help someone else, and it just evolves

and evolves. And pretty soon they lose their spiritual stability, and they start going down a path that is beyond their relationship with Jesus Christ. And I think Peter tried to warn us, that even though some of your intentions may be good, don't get carried away with what you're doing for another person, so that you lose sight of your ultimate goal, which is Jesus Christ.

N: So often we look to other people, other resources, to help us. People want to help us as well - People offer, and if we don't go back to the Bible daily, constantly, to see what they're saying, how it measures up to what Scripture says, we will be led down a path that is completely destructive. And eventually, if we're not careful, we'll end up in a completely different country of belief, and our life will be reflective of it. So I think that's a great example, and we do need to be on guard.

A: One thing that I think a lot about, and we just had a couple of days ago in the news service all over the place, about another Christian leader failure, and just a tremendous embarrassment. And I think of this with what Peter says, and I can guarantee you that this particular individual didn't start out to humiliate the name of Jesus, or to humiliate Christ's followers, or to humiliate the organization that he represents. So I think you have good intentions after good intentions, but it seems like there's a theme, especially with these guys who have been Christ followers for a long time. You would think they would have it down, and they just totally mess up for years and years, and then they finally get caught. So I think it's easy to kind of say, "Yeah, yeah, Peter, you know - don't get carried away. I mean, yeah. Okay." But we see it all the time with people who have claimed the name of Jesus and just have behaved terribly.

N: Yeah. The moment we take our foot off the gas pedal of our faith, we begin to drift, and we unfortunately believe the lie, that we can drift for a long time. But eventually, it catches up with us and by God's grace, I think that He allows us to get caught in our sin, if we are His children. For those who aren't, maybe it's the being caught that'll finally get them to realize how broken they are, and finally turn to Him as Savior. But you know, that keeping our foot on the gas pedal reminds me [I like that analogy]. You like that? [That is awesome. Yeah. I'm going to use it. You're going to hear me saying it, and I'm not going to give you the credit. Where I'm going to say, you know, "I was thinking the other day, put your foot on the gas] [Laughter. That's right.] Typical leader right there. [There you go.] It doesn't matter who gets the credit as long as we win, right? [That's right.] Isn't that what they say? [That's right. Well, we write the rules.] That's right. Well, speaking of pressing on, that reminds me of what Paul would say in Philippians 3. Cara, you know, Philippians 3:12 says, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on..." Describe for our listeners what that means - to press on.

C: Well, this is your foot on the gas pedal analogy, Arnie. [Thank you.] To press on would be to continue moving forward – steady, sometimes forcefully. Sometimes you've got to force yourself to move, depending on what is going on in your life, but always moving forward in your faith walk, despite your circumstances.

N: Yeah, no one coasts to growth, no one coasts to greatness, no one coasts into maturity in any area of life. And so we do - we have to constantly keep our foot on the gas pedal, keep pressing

on. Otherwise we become another casualty in the road, like Arnie was describing, and we don't want to do that for the sake of Christianity. And we don't want to do it to tarnish the name of Christ.

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We're talking about growing as a Christian – so let's follow Paul's thoughts continuing in Philippians 3 at verse 13 (NASB): <sup>13</sup> **Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead."**

Paul refers to these Philippians as brethren nine times in this letter. When we become a Christ-follower, we become brothers and sisters in Christ: Adopted children to God. We have a unique relationship that cannot be compared. This is why I get excited to meet new believers all over the world. I get to meet extended family members that I will have relationship with forever. Paul then reiterates that he hasn't reached perfection *yet*. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate our sin nature. But as we mature in our relationship with Christ, we learn to hate sin more and more. Our regret for sinning increases, and at the same time, our gratefulness for grace increases as well.

As we continue in Philippians Chapter 3, Paul identifies another trait of a spiritually-minded believer: **laser-like focus**. Paul says in verse 12, "**but one thing I do...**" Paul wasn't like most of us who have 20 irons in the fire. He wasn't serving on five boards, running kids to fifteen activities. He also wasn't in the gym, reading 15 books, attending 3 seminars, and teaching 4 classes, and watching a series on Netflix over the weekend. No, Paul was focused on one thing. We're going to unpack this further shortly. But from what we can see from Paul's writings, he was into sports. I think one reason might be because it exemplified this focus of "one thing". It's a great analogy. With very few exceptions, such as Bo Jackson, professional athletes are great at their sport - not 5 sports, not 2 sports - one. They put all their energy into training for their sport or their event. This is what makes them great. They have laser-like focus. If they dabbled in all sports, they'd be mediocre, or maybe good, but not great. Paul desired completeness in Christ; this meant focusing on one thing.

I think this is incredibly hard for us today, even in the world of COVID-19. There seems to be a badge of honor by answering the question, "How are you?" with "Busy!" That is just the default answer today. "How was your weekend?" "Busy".

When I turned 29 years old, I remember the day. I was depressed. I cannot think of too many times in my life when I felt depressed, but I will never forget that day. I was lying on my couch in our basement. My wife came downstairs and said, "It's your birthday, what's wrong?" I said "I'm a loser. Look at me. I'm 29 years old. I haven't graduated college. I have a joke for a job. I know I could do so much more, and yet here I am. I've let you down. I've let my kids down. I'm a loser."

Like any good wife, she tried to build me up. And she tried to remind me of the many blessings that God had given me. But that day I just wouldn't hear it. But what that day did do for me is it propelled me to turn things around. It was in that day that I began to get a laser-like focus. No

longer would I complain about my situation. No longer would I feel bad about where things were at. I believe it was that next month I started making calls. I figured out what I needed to do to get back into school. It was over the course of the next two years that I had a laser-like focus to finish Bible School. Ask any of my friends. I would not deviate from schoolwork and Bible study. What little time I did have, I gave to my family and, of course, to my job. But as John Maxwell says, “In order to go up, you have to give up.” It’s the law of the tradeoff - To have a laser like focus. And when you have that focus, you will say no to certain things, at least for a time.

But the reality is if you are going to grow and go - if you are going to be a spiritually minded believer - you need to have a laser-like focus. Well, you’re probably thinking, what one thing should take priority? The answer is: your relationship with God. Everything flows from that.

Paul then unpacks this one thing. He says he forgets what lies behind him and reaches forward to what lies ahead. This is another trait of a spiritually minded believer: they are **focused on the future**. Remember, Paul did his accounting in verses 5-6. His past is his past. It’s done. He says he forgets it. He doesn’t mean he’s supernaturally experienced amnesia. No, he has cut the weight and guilt of his past sins and mistakes. He has cut the ties to the works of the flesh. Carrying guilt of the past paralyzes us, and results in not experiencing the true forgiveness that Christ offers. Always looking back at our past successes makes us apathetic and lazy in improving. Marshall Goldsmith wrote a book called *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*. That’s what Paul is saying.

When coaching clients, I often try to understand whether they’re motivated by what they can *lose* or what they can *gain*. This all goes back to focusing on the future. Do you want your future to be deficient in “this thing” or “these people”? Do you want to experience a greater level of whatever it is? But I keep getting them to have a vision or a focus on the future. That is what Paul is asking us to do as believers - to have a focus on our true and glorious future. Listen to what he says beginning in verse 14.

**<sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

So Paul decided to let go of his past and focus on the future, so that he could do his one thing: press on toward the goal – the finish – so he might get the prize of the Heavenly calling of God.

Paul says he presses on, or we could say he runs with gusto – he is giving it his all to go for the prize. What prize? Some might think Paul is speaking of Salvation. Paul is not speaking of Salvation. Remember, Salvation cannot be earned. Salvation is a gift. It’s unearned, unmerited, and cannot be paid back. It’s by grace through faith. Paul isn’t running for Salvation. Paul’s race has been won because of what Christ has done. He is running for a prize.

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N: Cara, give our listeners a few practical tips on how to focus on your future with Christ.

C: This is how I do it. I know the shadow proves the sunshine. And what I mean by that, is so we should expect things to be wonky, because we’re not meant for this world. So I know that

God is in charge. I say that a lot, but I find my comfort in His peace, when I dig into Scripture and reinforce those promises, and the plan He has - that in the end all is going to be complete, fixed and lovely. And if you want to dig deeper in Scripture, there are so many cool resources - one of which we're very familiar with, because there's been so much time and research put into it at Back to the Bible. But goTandem can help you get into Scripture and bring peace - practical tips for anyone right now that needs their knives sharpened. So goTandem.

N: That's one of the things I love about Back to the Bible, is all the resources that they provide for people, and at no cost. So yeah, goTandem. You have daily discipleship there. We have the reading plans. We have the daily *Forward*, our devotional, and so many more options - and again, all free. So I can guarantee you that there is something for you, that's going to help you grow in your faith and sharpen those knives. Arnie, I'd like to hear from you. How does focusing on Christ affect all other things in your life that need your attention?

A: I think the biggest adjustment that I made in my life as a Christ follower, and when we came up with the concept of moving closer to Jesus today than you were yesterday - when you think about that, that is a daunting task to even try it. And not in a prideful sense, but in a self-motivating way - how am I going to move closer to Jesus today than I was yesterday? You know - the old pedal to the metal - moving forward, not drifting, but how do you do that? How do you become intentional? And just thinking of it every morning and night, those two simple thoughts when you open the day, and when you close the day, will radically change your life. It'll affect everything you do. It doesn't mean you're going to do it every day. You're going to mess up, but at least you're intentional, at least you're trying, and you're open to God's Word to find out how to move closer.

N: Well, what you're talking about is a true North, right? I mean, you know exactly where you're heading if you can keep your eye on Christ. And I know I was reading a book this last week, where these people are trapped in the woods, and they can't find that true North. They can't see that piece, so they just wander through the woods aimlessly, and continue to get lost. But thankfully for us, Christ doesn't change. And thankfully for us, we can always turn back to the Bible to see that True North, and get things back on track. Let's close our time today by talking about COVID-19. This week, I was reminded about life, you know, where it's been in COVID-19, and where it's starting to go back. Our kids are back in school; football is happening. We've got three kids in football. And so every night of the week, we're back to that activity. But before this week, guess what? COVID-19 forced us all to give up a lot of things. So I'm curious to hear from each of you, if COVID-19 went away tomorrow, are there things that you've learned to live without during this time, that have actually helped you focus more on Christ?

C: Well, through all this, I've definitely had the Holy Spirit working on me. So as far as giving something up, I can tell you that I gave up the news, okay. So I'm being more picky how I gather information about current events. I think we all have to realize that information these days is purposely spun, to make us sad, discouraged, or to divide us into groups. And that's not me burying my head in the sand with that. I think we should seek the truth. And I think we should be political. I mean, but there is so much news that's just noise. And it's distracting us from Jesus.

This isn't the days of Noah - there are so many of us who love and follow Christ. So you are not alone in your beliefs, despite how they try to make you feel. Jesus was not this social justice warrior. Do not let the news and other people try to distract you from why Jesus came, which is to save lost souls. So we need to be focusing our energy, and be concerned about lost souls, just like Jesus.

N: Exactly right. What do you think Arnie?

A: Probably what I've given up because of COVID-19, that is travel. I used to travel a lot. I think I've traveled almost 2 million miles since I've worked for Back to the Bible, and I don't travel at all anymore. That's probably the biggest change. I love not traveling. I think I'm a lot healthier. If things get back to normal, am I going to head out? No, I don't think so. I think God's got me right where He wants me, doing what He wants me to do.

N: So if you're not going, does that mean you're sending me now? So I'm going to join the million mile club. Is that the deal?

A: “So Send I You”, as the song goes, so send I you - a new meaning to that song, baby.

N: All right. Well, I too love to travel, and yeah, it's been a different season for us all. And I think though, we've learned that when we give up so many of the activities, and the things that honestly distract us, we're free to focus. And that's the name of a book I recently read, *Free to Focus*, (Michael Hyatt) - eliminating the distractions and the things that help us really focus on that which matters. And we all know in this room today, the thing that matters most is our relationship with Christ. And when we pursue Christ with our heart, and our soul, and our minds, our whole beings, everything else falls into place - Even when the world comes crashing down around us.