

Theme: Pressing On!

Text: Philippians 3:12-16 (ESV)

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Well, here it is. The “first sermon.” There’s usually a lot of anticipation--even excitement—for the first sermon of the “new pastor,” isn’t there? “What’s the ‘new guy’ gonna be like?” “What’s he going to sound like?” “What kind of preaching style will he have?” (“Oh, man I hope he’s not boring, or long-winded—or both!”)...“Is he going to screw up?”

As you might guess, the “first sermon” is also a very highly anticipated event for me—the pastor—as well. I want to make a good first impression in the pulpit. I want to present God’s Word clearly in a way that is both understandable and interesting. I want to do it concisely, yet completely. And, of course, I don’t want to screw up!

Well, I might as well just get it out of the way early and let you know that I’m not perfect. What? You already knew that? Good! So I guess I can let you know that the fact is I’m going to “screw up” from time to time. In fact, I’ve “screwed up” a couple of times this week already. I haven’t done all the things I wanted to get to in my first week here. I haven’t visited all the people I wanted to stop in and see during the first week. Even the preparation for the service didn’t go as quickly or as smoothly as I had planned (just ask Chris Holt how many failed bulletin printing attempts we threw into the recycle bin this week!). There is nothing like your first week in a new place doing lots of new things and meeting lots of new people to humble you and make you feel like you’re doing all of this for the first time, even if you have been doing it for quite a few years! In some ways it felt like it was my very first week in the ministry.

But isn’t that a good thing in way? Sure, there’s some awkwardness and some adjustment time and even some extra work getting used to a new situation, a new area, a new ministry. Some awkwardness and some adjustment time getting to know each other and getting used to serving with each other. But, really, we’ve got a great opportunity right now—you and I—don’t we? Many of you don’t know me (or, even if you do know me, you don’t know what it’s like to have me as your pastor). As far as you know I could be the greatest pastor there is! You don’t know. You don’t know some of my bad habits, my quirks, my hang-ups and frustrations, the mistakes and failures I’ve had in the past. And so this time—right now—is a God-given opportunity for me to “fix” some of those bad habits, to improve on some of the things I have not done well in the past and grow as both a pastor and a follower of Christ.

In much the same way, I don’t know many of you (and those of you I do know, I don’t yet know what it’s like to be your pastor). As far as I know you are the most faithful & helpful member at this church. As far as I know you’re here every Sunday and are always willing to help when needed and serve the Lord with the gifts and abilities He’s given you. I don’t know if your attendance has been bad, your attitude towards your brothers and sisters in Christ hasn’t always been what it always should be, or if you’ve not been as available to serve the Lord through this congregation as you might be capable of doing. And so this time—right now—is a God-given opportunity for you to “fix” some of those bad habits, to improve on some of the things you have not done so well in the past and grow as both a member of this congregation and a follower of Christ.

We've got "clean slates" with each other. You and I don't have a "history" together, or a scorecard full of times we've wronged each other, hurt each other, or failed each other in various ways. In many ways that makes it very easy for us to "move forward" together, doesn't it? Most importantly, we've got "clean slates" with God Himself thanks to the sacrifice His Son Jesus made for us on that cross of Calvary! Full, free, complete forgiveness for all our past failures, mistakes, bad habits and "screw ups"—even for our deep, dark, ugly sins that we like to keep buried deep in the "basement" of our hearts and don't want anyone else to see (or should I say deep in "the garage" of our hearts—since it doesn't appear they have basements in California!). We're washed clean! Doesn't that make it much easier for us to "move forward" together?

This is similar to what the Apostle Paul is talking about in our text when he writes, **"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 13-14).** Talk about a man with a past! Earlier in his life Paul had, in his own words, **"persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13).** Paul was far from "perfect"—even after he was converted and became an apostle of Jesus Christ—and he knew it. He writes in the first verse of our text, **"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v. 12).**

Paul is speaking about "running the race" of the Christian life. We can see the finish line ahead. We can see the prize Jesus has already won for us—heaven. Eternal life with Him and all believers. But God still had a "race" for him to finish on this earth, and when you're running a race it's not a good idea to look back. Paul certainly wasn't looking back! He did not look back with pride on his past accomplishments and dwell on how great an apostle and pastor he was "back in the day." He knew those accomplishments weren't able to earn him favor with God anyway. He also did not look back on the past with regret and dwell on and wallow in sorrow over past sins, which had already been washed away by Jesus' blood. No, Paul says He **"forgot"** about those past things and **"pressed on"** each day to grow in His faith, to live a more Christ-like life, and to serve Jesus in more and better ways.

You and I, like Paul, have been give a "race to run" in this life. And God has chosen, beginning on this day to have us run together as pastor and members, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's Go! Let's "run" together (running's more fun that way anyway!). Let's **"[forget] what lies behind" (v. 13)**—the sins, the baggage we've been carrying, the hurts and offenses and obstacles that have been keeping us from serving the Lord with all that is within us—and let's **"press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14).**

The "race" can be a pretty rough course. We'll need to **"press on"** with *persistence*. It can be a very long "race" and the going at times can be a lot slower than we'd like. We'll need to **"press on"** with *patience*. We're going to take some wrong turns along the way as well. We'll need to **"press on"** *pardoning* each other and being *pardoned* by each other, as well as by the LORD Himself.

Most importantly, we need to focus on the goal; the "finish line." We need to focus on the One who not only has "run" this race with us here on earth; He *won* it for us! We need to **focus on Jesus!** As we read in the book of Hebrews, **"...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV).**

I am excited and very optimistic about the "race" that we are going to be running together and what the Lord is going to accomplish through us in our ministry together! I hope you are too! But let's make sure we always keep our focus where it needs to be. I am not perfect. You aren't either. I am not a miracle worker, and as far as I know, neither are any of you! But I know the One who is—and you do too! Focus on Him! Focus on Jesus!

✝ See in His cross His limitless and everlasting love for you.

✝ See in His ugly wounds your beautiful and complete healing!

✝ See in that cross your slate wiped completely clean because of the forgiveness He won for you there.

✝ See in Jesus' resurrection your "finish line" and the eternal life in heaven that Jesus' resurrection from the dead guarantees for you.

And let's "**press on**" toward that "finish line." One step at a time. One day at a time. "**Pressing on,**" moving forward, focusing on Jesus. He's given us work to do—a privilege and responsibility that involves the eternal souls of our fellow man. He's given us a race to run—to run together, focused on Jesus. Let's Go! Amen.