

The Word of God we'll focus on this morning is the second lesson from Philippians chapter three. Let's begin with prayer. *Lord Jesus, uphold me, that I might uplift thee. Amen.*

"Don't look back – something might be gaining on you." Those words were spoken by a man that some of you might remember. His name was Satchel Paige. He was a professional baseball player in the first half of the last century, and he definitely had a "don't look back" kind of attitude when it came to his career. Satchel Paige is viewed by many baseball historians as one of the greatest pitchers of all time even though he only played five years in Major League Baseball. Paige, of course, lived at a different time in our nation's history. For most of his professional career black players were not allowed to play in Major League Baseball, and so Paige played on several teams in other leagues. But his talent was undeniable.

After the color barrier was broken in baseball by Jackie Robinson, other African-American players began to join the league, and it wasn't long before Paige was among them. At the age of 42 Satchel Paige was signed by the Cleveland Indians. He was the first black pitcher ever in the American League. He would go on to win the World Series that year, his "rookie" year in the big leagues. He'd also earn back-to-back All-Star team selections in his final two seasons at the age of 45 and 46 respectively. Maybe you can understand why someone with his background and career would say, "Don't look back – something might be gaining on you." He never rested on his laurels... he was never content to look back at what he'd accomplished. He always was looking ahead to the next big thing... and always working hard so that he wouldn't get tripped up from something sneaking up from behind.

Kind of a neat story, and one that I thought of as I considered the sermon text we are looking at this week. The Apostle Paul who wrote down these words was also a guy who didn't look back. And in the section of God's Word, we read we saw him offer those same words of wisdom to us. For Paul it was all about **pressing on toward the goal**. And for us the same is true. If we look back, there are so many things that can trip us up... that can distract us from the goal out in front of us. So, let's take just a few minutes this morning to consider how we too might **press on toward the goal** to win the prize... the only prize that matters.

Now, right before we get to the first verses of our sermon text you should know that the Apostle Paul had been writing about his personal longing to reach the ultimate goal of his faith – the resurrection of the dead. But Paul knew he wasn't there yet, and he says as much as he begins this section we're looking at now.

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.

Paul knew that he wasn't home in heaven yet. He knew that day was yet to come. He also knew the Last Day – which is the ultimate longing of every believer – the day when Jesus will raise all the dead, he knew that was still to come too... And so, he said he would **press on... Press on to take hold of** heaven... to take hold of the resurrection... to take hold of an eternity with no sin, death, or sorrow. And he'd do it by remembering Jesus and forgetting his past. He remembered that the reason he could press on to take hold of eternal life, was because Jesus had already taken hold of him. And that was all he needed to remember. Everything else – whether Paul's failures or all that Paul had accomplished in his past could simply be left there – in the past.

You see, Paul knew if he just lingered thinking about old sins all he'd feel was guilt and shame... or if he just sat around living in his past and reliving past accomplishments, well, he'd never move on to a richer knowledge of God's Word or a more mature Christian life that was molded by and modeled on that Word of God. Paul couldn't live in the past, because he knew his goals were out in front of him yet.

It's kind of like someone who runs races. If you run the 800-meter race in track and field for instance you are usually running at least two laps depending on the size of the track you are on. Now, I'm guessing that people who train and compete in this event don't get out there on the track and stop after one lap to look back and admire what they just accomplished. Nor do they stop to think about how bad the first lap went. When they get to the second lap around the track, they just keep going. In fact, the closer they get to the finish line the more effort they put in as they strive and strain to give it everything they have.

That's the picture Paul wants us to see here when it comes to the life of a Christian. Don't look back. When it comes to growing up in your faith – both in understanding God's Word AND putting God's Word into practice in your life – when it comes to this God wants us to keep pushing... keep pressing... keep moving forward. Paul said: 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.** His point? Live up to the faith God has given you. And if you need to grow some more, trust God will get you there. And while you are growing don't go backwards, at least live up to what you've learned so far and live your life in accordance with it!

Paul also went on to say: **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.** Paul's desire was that his fellow believers might grow up in their faith, just like he had, and continue to grow as they pressed on toward heaven.

And notice then how he contrasts this attitude with the attitude of the unbelieving world... people who **"live as enemies of the cross of Christ"** as Paul puts it. He says: **Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.** For us as Christians our destiny – our end goal is the resurrection and life eternal. For those who reject Christ the goal – whether they realize it or not – is eternal death and destruction. And these opposite goal posts lead to opposite outcomes even in this life.

Those who live as enemies of God grow more and more not in faith but in fulfilling sinful desires and acting on them, even taking pride in their shameful behavior. It doesn't take much looking to see this in the world around us where people not only defend sinful behavior but take pride in it.

But the sad truth is, at times in our lives perhaps we've found ourselves tempted by such evil desires and pride. Perhaps we bragged about the number of beers we could drink... or the number of people we could sleep with. We laughed about how we got away with cheating on a test or lying to our parents. Maybe we boasted of the money we made, even if it was earned dishonestly or earned at the expense of others, or at the expense of time spent with family or in God's house on a Sunday morning. Maybe we mocked and ridiculed classmates or coworkers with our friends or laughed with our spouse about how foolish that person was at work or at church... so much more foolish than you.

Any of you have things like that in your past? Then again... maybe these temptations are not just all in the distant past...

Brothers and sisters, whatever the sinful desires are that war against your soul... see them for what they truly are. They are false gods... idols that seek your devotion by trying to fill you with wicked delight in shameful sin. Turn from them. Call the behavior in your life that is not God-pleasing what it should be called: sin. Don't joke about it. Don't excuse it. Don't let it linger. You are Christians after all, and

that means Christ lives in you. He will give you strength for the battle with such sin. He will give forgiveness when you struggle. But remembering this then keep moving forward in faith! Press on toward the goal... press on to take hold of the eternal life Jesus won for you... and know that as you press on in faith, Christ Jesus has already pressed ahead with the victory, and he has a hold on you.

This is the important truth to remember my friends when we read portions of the Bible like our first reading and Gospel reading especially, where God has some hard truths he needs us to hear. God does this because he loves us. Much like a parent who has to be honest with a child who is being disobedient... they do it not to cause the child pain, but to save the child from pain... they do it not because they want their kid to feel bad, but because they want them to experience real happiness and joy that comes from following a better path in life. God loves us even more than any parent can love their child. It's why he calls us to repentance today... calls us to turn away from the sinful desires that seek to control our lives... and the sinful actions that seek to derail our lives and bring harm to others. Jesus loves us too much to lie to us... to tell us everything in our lives is okay... when it really isn't.

And we know he loves us that much because he didn't just say the words... he backed them up with action. He entered our world and lived a life that showed perfect spiritual maturity and perfect fruits of faith day in and day out. And he did that not just so we'd have some examples to follow. He did this in our place. He did it because we cannot do it... not perfectly. And perfection is what God demands.

Thankfully, in Jesus, God finds his demands for us met. And even more than that, he finds his justice satisfied... because the Son of God came to this wicked world and to his rebellious people... and they killed him, just like he said they would in our Gospel reading today. And to be fair, it may have been their decisions and their sins that brought him to the cross, but it was our sins also, yours and mine, that made his death necessary. Jesus was killed to pay the price of our sins and failures. And he paid it willingly. That's how much he loved you. That's how much he still loves you – no matter what your life has looked like... no matter what last week looked like for you... no matter what your future holds.

What amazing love! And we respond to such love by pushing ahead... pressing onward... striving with all our might for perfection. Working as if everything depends on us, while knowing full well it all depends on Jesus. And yes, we know that we won't reach the ultimate goal until we reach the Last Day and our eternal life... But that day is coming... as Paul said: **Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 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.** Thanks to Jesus, perfection is on the way for us.

And until that day? Until that day answer God's call in his Word where he tells us to: **fight the good fight of the faith... to run the race marked out for us... to seek a crown that will last...** knowing that we will one day receive it... because of Christ. Not because of our own effort or striving... but because of Christ's efforts for us... his holy life lived for us... his innocent death that covers us... his resurrection which assures us of victory. So, press on brothers and sisters. And don't look back. Amen.