

March 25, 2007

Lent 5

"Pressing On with Christ's Righteousness"

PHILIPPIANS 3:8-14

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, 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.

It was the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Bruce Jenner had completed 9 of 10 events in the prestigious decathlon with enough total points to guarantee the victory and gold medal, even if he just walked around the track in final 1500 meter race. Instead Bruce Jenner ran one of the best 1500 meter races of his career. Cameras zoomed into show a runner striving to do his best, giving it all he had, almost with a smile on his face, because the victory was his.

In the words just read to you, your life as Christian is being compared to runner in a race. You are pushing yourself. You are pressing on to serve Christ, not to gain the victory, but because the victory is already yours. You already have Christ. You have his righteousness. The race will not always be easy. In fact there are some weeks they are very hard for us. That's OK if you understand what this race is all about and what it means to push yourself and press on with Christ's righteousness.

Putting false hopes of the past behind us

In order to push forward for Christ, we need to put the past behind us, especially the false hope that once permeated every fiber of our being. Listen again to how Paul regarded his past life. "What is more I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not have a righteousness that comes from my own that comes from the law, but that is through faith in Christ." Paul lost his trust in himself. He once believed that being a Jew, knowing the law, being circumcised, and being super religious would gain him favor and acceptance by God. Then his eyes were opened to see that his efforts to keep the law were nothing but rubbish compared to the gift of righteousness in Christ.

That word rubbish is strong word. Have you ever stored something in the refrigerator,

way in the back and forgot about it? Months later you opened it up and saw the most ugly green looking stuff with the most wretched smell. What did you do with it? Dump it out and put in the garbage disposal, and then wash the container in the sink? I don't think so. You made a quick trip to the garbage dumpster outside and disposed of the foul smelling mess. That is what Paul says he wanted to do with his own personal righteousness and goodness when he came to know Christ. He considered it a loss, something worthless that could not save him.

Maybe I can illustrate this to you with a bag I am holding in my hand. Believe me this bag is filled with money, over \$50,000. This money has no real value because it is play money for the popular game of monopoly. We know our good deeds of love and kindness are great for getting along with people but like play money in Monopoly they cannot make us acceptable to God. I was a good person last week. I saw a little dog running down Blosser Road, disoriented and lost. I whistled and he came to me into the entry of the church and into my office. I called Animal Control and they took him to be reunited with his owners. It feels good to help a lost dog, even better to help people who are need, to show everyone you meet kindness and love. All of these efforts as valuable as they are for the welfare of society are empty, worthless, rubbish when it comes to making up for some past sin we have committed and making ourselves worthy of God's love.

Why is my righteousness so deficient that I need to consider it a loss? I am born thinking that if I take a minus number that represents what I do wrong I can add a plus number to make it right. Take a -10. I am born thinking that by adding 20 to that number I can make it a +10. The math does not work that way when it comes to having peace with God. When I try to balance out the bad with the good, I am in reality multiplying everything I do by zero. 10 times 0 is 0. 100 times 0 is zero. According to the Bible all my righteousness are as filthy rags before God. Trying to use them to make up for what I have done wrong only compounds the problem of sinking further and further into debt. That is why Paul said all his good deeds and best religious efforts from the past he considered a loss.

In contrast to this loss he considered a gain to have Christ. Think of all the blessings you have in your plus column. You have a family that loves you. You live in a great country. You have money to buy food and clothing and provide for a home. At the top of the list are Christ and his righteousness. That is your greatest gain. When Job had everything taken away from him, his family, his wealth, his honor and even the respect of his wife, he could still say joyfully, "I know that my Redeemer lives." Some of you sitting here this morning are putting money into an IRA account so that you have some extra money when you retire. What if you could have a different kind of "IRA" an Individual Redemption Account where Christ places into your account his righteousness? That is what has happened to you in your past life. You have had your eyes opened to see that your righteousness could not save you. Through the gift of faith You have had Christ placed and his righteousness placed into You and that makes you the richest people in the world.

Living every moment with Christ's righteousness

With this righteousness of Christ in your account, every minute of your existence on this earth becomes something very special. Paul writes, "That I may gain Christ and be found in him." He wanted to be found in Christ at every minute of his life on this earth covered with Christ and his righteousness. He also said he wanted to know Christ and the power

of his resurrection. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, to attain to the resurrection of the dead."

We want to know Christ and we want to embrace his resurrection and share in his suffering for our sin. Jesus' resurrection from the dead is our seal and our stamp of approval that the heavenly Father accepted everything Jesus did for us when he cried out from the cross, "It is finished." Through faith we share in those sufferings, we share in the resurrection. Have you ever seen a check where two names are on the account? Both people share in the ability to write checks from that account. Jesus' name was placed on his suffering, death and resurrection, and that we share that with him. He is the vine and we are branches, attached to him and sharing all these blessings.

We want to be found in him with his righteousness hour by hour and minute by minute, 24/7. What a blessing this is for us to be found in him! That means you can sample any moment of your life here on this earth, and because you are connected to Christ as the vine is connected to the branches you will always be pure and holy and righteous before God through Christ.

Because of how you are found in Christ at any moment in time, you are ready to meet the Lord when he comes again in glory. You also know that because you are justified and have peace with God, you have direct access to your Father in prayer at all times. You are also in a position to know that God loves you in Christ because of the robe of righteousness that you wear. I think you would agree with me that our greatest joy and blessing in life is to be loved by people around us, but even more important to be loved by God. That is a reality in your life and mine because as Paul says, "we are found in him."

We put the past behind us, we cling to Christ righteousness for every present situation, and we look forward to the future because of the exciting moments that will be given to us to live for Christ.

Pressing ahead to the future

Paul writes, "Not that we have already obtained all this, or have all ready been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me." The Greek word for taking hold is not a light word. It means to grab something very tightly, the way you might grab a child that is drowning and pull it to safety. Christ Jesus has taken hold of you and placed you in a position where you can grab a hold of the opportunities to live for him the way he has grabbed a hold of you. You have heard of the Latin expression, "carpe diem" which means seize the moment.

To illustrate our privilege to live for Christ Paul compares our lives to a runner in a race. "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." The runner in the race cannot look back at the past mistakes in the race and worry about them. Our past has been forgiven. We have the privilege of straining toward what is ahead of us today and tomorrow and the next day. The word for goal has the thought of a marker post in a race. The runners think to themselves, "If only we can make it to the

next marker post." We wake up in the morning and think to ourselves if only I can make it through this day. But then there are marker posts to help us. There is a husband or wife who needs encouragement. A boss at work who needs a job well done. A worker in the grocery store that needs a nice smile. A friend who needs a phone. Children who need our full attention. Life is full of opportunities as Paul wrote in an earlier chapter, "For me to live is Christ." All through the day we are privileged to constantly pray for those who need help in their lives.

Oh, the final prize for all that you do for Christ is already been provided for you. It is waiting for you. You are going for the gold and the gold is already in your hand because of the righteousness of Christ that is already yours. With smiles on our faces, and joy in our hearts, and sweat pouring down our bodies, we strain for the sheer joy and privilege of living for Christ because of what he has waiting for us, and what he has done to rescue us. Get out your T-shirt and your jogging pants and your running shoes. It is another week to press on with Christ's righteousness. The world is watching us run our race and it is a privilege to do our best for the Lord. Amen.