

I'm Pressing On!
Philippians 3:12 - 4:1
Preached by Rev. Keith Davis June 17, 2007

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as was mentioned earlier, the theme for the VBS last week was *The Race is On*. That theme captures the Biblical idea, the Biblical imagery of the Christian life as a race which we run, a race which God calls us to run each day.

This imagery isn't unusual. In fact, there are no less than 7 passages in the New Testament which liken the Christian life to some sort of athletic activity or event like running and even boxing. There's 1 Corinthians 9: 24: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*

Then there's 2 Timothy 4: 7 which says *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* Finally, there's Hebrews 12:1 *Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run, with perseverance, the race marked out before us.*

Now, there's no question that we Christians today live in a culture that is thoroughly acquainted with athletics and all that goes into athletic competition. The same could be said for the people to whom Paul wrote this letter. The city of Philippi was immersed in Greek culture, and the Christians there were no doubt aware that Athens was the sports capital of the world.

Every year Athens hosted the Greek games. Athletes from all over the empire would come to compete against each other in tests of speed and endurance, in tests of strength, in tests of skill.

So in the same way that we Christians who live in and around Chicagoland know the game of baseball, or basketball, or football so too, these Christians in Philippi were very familiar with the sport of running and racing.

So Paul (a fan of these games, too?) draws upon that familiarity; he uses that imagery to challenge and encourage them in their Christian walk. And that is what we're going to consider this morning. **God Calls His People to Press on toward the Goal He has for us.** We press on:

1) With a Humble Attitude

2) With a Forward Focus

1) With a Humble Attitude

Congregation, in order for an athlete to compete at any level, he must be in tip-top shape, in peak physical condition. But anyone who's ever been in competition before, anyone who's ever run a race, or played baseball, golf, or tennis (etc.), knows that there's a considerable mental component to every sport and competition as well.

It was baseball manager Yogi Berra (whose known for his odd and peculiar sayings) who once said *Baseball is 90% mental, the other half is physical*. He was overstating the fact that even a baseball player has to be in the right frame of mind to compete.

For example, you can be the most talented athlete on the field, you can be in better shape than anyone else, but if you step out onto the playing field, or onto that running track with the attitude or mindset that all you have to do is 'show up', that you've got the race won before the starter's pistol goes off—then it's a sure bet that you're in for some real trouble (you'll probably lose because you underestimated the difficulty of the race).

Congregation, the same principle holds true for the spiritual race we run. For, *how well we run the race* as Christians depends so much on our frame of mind, on our attitude of humility. Let me show you what I mean.

Look at vs. 12. Paul writes; *Not that I have already obtained all this, or that I have already been made perfect...* Here, the Apostle completely rejects all feelings of pride and self-confidence; he rejects the arrogance of Christians in his day who thought that they had *arrived* spiritually speaking, that they had already attained spiritual perfection.

And don't forget what Paul just said. He just finished saying how he had sacrificed everything for the sake of Christ: his status and standing as Hebrew of Hebrews, as a Pharisee, as a zealous persecutor of the church.

He sacrificed all that--counting it loss--so he could know the surpassing greatness of Christ; so that he could gain Christ; so that he could share in the righteousness that comes by God through faith in Christ; he sacrificed all that to join in the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

Now he rejoices to know that *Christ* is his and *he* is Christ's. But notice, even someone as spiritually blessed as Paul, even someone as sanctified, as (can we say) *spiritually gifted* as Paul, does not speak as one who is *smug* or *complacent* with where he is spiritually speaking.

Again, keep in mind who this is. This is Paul, the apostle of apostles, the pastor of pastors, the missionary of missionaries; but with whom does he identify? Does he see himself as 'a cut above' his fellow Christians? Does he see himself as being superior to the average churchgoer?

No. He identifies himself *with* his fellow Christians; his humble confession is that he, too, is just a pilgrim walking on the pathway of righteousness; he (like every other believer in Christ) is still pressing on, with a long, long way to go.

It shouldn't surprise us to know that Paul is the same man who said in 1 Timothy 1:15 *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.*

So the message to the Philippians (and to you and me this morning) is very clear. If Paul—who was unmatched in his zeal for Christ, whose life was wholly and completely dedicated to Christ so that he willingly endured much pain and suffering for Christ's sake...

If Paul could say that he had not yet laid hold of it, that he was not perfect, that he had not yet arrived but was still running the race, striving after holiness--then what must that mean for the Christians in Philippi? And what must this mean for you and me?

At the very last, it calls us to be just as self-conscious, just as aware, just as honest and humble about our own faults and failings, about our own sins and shortcomings. There's no doubt that

he engaged in daily, constant self-examination of heart, mind, soul and body. He not only examined his actions, but also his motives, his thoughts, his innermost desires.

I think we can be fairly positive that Paul never thought to himself *I did well enough today; that was good enough for God*. Please don't misunderstand: this is not to suggest that Paul ever doubted or questioned his righteous standing before God in Christ Jesus.

No. He knew very well that all his sins were forgiven in and through the blood of Christ. Also, Paul knew that his striving after perfection was not something he did to *earn* God's favor. His striving was out of genuine gratitude to God for all that He had done for him in Christ Jesus.

In other words, in this Christian life, the race we run, the *striving after holiness* is a sacrifice of thanksgiving; it's the age old calling that God gives to his people 'to be holy even as he is holy'; to walk in obedience; to obey his commandments; to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

But tragically, not every Christian runs the race with humility, with this mind-set. You boys and girls from VBS may remember that Rocky the rabbit had a very difficult time finding the way. That's because Rocky didn't have the right mindset. He thought he could take a short cut. He thought he was smart enough to find the way on his own.

There are Christians just like us who live life like this. Instead of having a humble heart, we grow proud and arrogant, we think we're stronger than we really are; or we like to think we can take the easy way out--take the short cut; we want to live the Christian life without painful sacrifices, without putting too much into it, without having to change our lives.

In fact, there's a great number of Christians who over the years simply stopped running the race—who gradually lose interest (zeal) in the Christian life. Yes, when asked, they'll say that they know God, that they believe in God, they will even say that they are saved by Jesus. But their life tells another story. They have stopped taking the time to read and study God's Word; they rarely consider the plan and will of God for their lives; they've lost interest in

worship—they have no qualms or regrets about missing church, about not coming to church twice on Sunday; they hardly give any thought to battling against sin in their lives.

All these people are basically saying the same thing: when it comes to living the Christian life, to running the race, I can just show up. I'm not a bad person; I know there's a God and God knows me; I do what Christians are expected to do. So that should suffice; that should get me by.

That's a dangerous and deadly frame of mind to be in, from a spiritual point of view. To ignore the call to holiness, to fail to take hold of that for which Jesus Christ has taken hold of us, is to refuse to run; it is to fall asleep on the trail, to get lazy; it is to fail to run the race. And that is unacceptable to God.

2) With a Forward Focus

God Calls His People to Press on toward the Goal He has for us. We've considered the first part of this call: the fact that we press on *with a humble attitude*. But secondly, notice that we press on *with a forward focus*.

If you look to the middle of verse 13, we hear Paul talking about his race strategy. This is how he runs the race with such effectiveness; this is the secret to his success. *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.*

There are several things here which deserve our attention. First, notice that Paul's focus is clearly locked in—*One thing I do...* Paul runs like a determined athlete who has a single-minded purpose and goal; he concentrates, putting all his focus forward—looking ahead.

Especially in a sprint, a good runner is trained to focus his eyes on what lies ahead—to focus forward on the finish line, on the prize; in the middle of the race, the runner does not glance from side to side or look back to see where everyone else is, or to watch the crowds as he runs. If he does he could lose focus; he could lose his stride, he could lose his sense of direction. So Paul is focused. *One thing I do...* nothing will divert him or distract him from his course.

So in this way, we can say that concentration is a key to the race we run for Christ. We have to remain forward focused, and not become distracted by all that we pass along the way. To be sure, this world is full of distractions: there's the pursuit of wealth, there's the lusts and worldly desires that call out to us everyday. Then there are the everyday troubles and worries and concerns we have of raising children, of making ends meet, of finding a career.

Speaking of distractions, just think of the obsession this world has with sports and amusements, its fixation with outward beauty and physical charm; its yearning to keep up appearances--so much so that as Christians we're only concerned about looking good and feeling good and having a good time, and we forget our calling to grow daily in the grace and knowledge of God.

So Paul says, he look ahead, concentrating so as not to lose focus. He says, *One thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead*. What does Paul mean when he says *forgetting what is behind*? Does it mean that he no longer cares about or talks about his past? Is he saying that his past (our past) doesn't really matter? No.

We have already witnessed in the opening verses of chapter 3, that Paul *often reflected* on his previous life as a Jew, as a zealot, as an enemy of Christ. And in many other passages beside this, Paul makes reference to his past. So certainly he isn't advocating that we Christians should just erase all memories of our past experience and reflect only on the future.

That's not what he means. Besides, that wouldn't be true to the Bible or to Christian experience, God's Word often calls us to look back at the example of the heroes of the faith (Heb. 11), to see how they prevailed, to see how they persevered, so that their lives might serve as an inspiration and motivation for us.

The same can be true in our lives, when we look back at a difficult trial that we endured, maybe it was a serious illness or sickness and we saw how God faithfully brought us through. That can inspire us in our Christian walk. Other times we can look back on a time of sin and weakness and failure and we can be admonished, and that can spark our desire to change our ways.

So Paul isn't condemning this kind of looking back. If anything, he would encourage it—that kind of hindsight helps push us forward. No, the kind of looking back that Paul is condemning here is the kind that would cause us to lose speed in the race; it is the kind of looking back that causes us to break stride and even come to a complete stop.

It's the kind of looking back that rises out of pride and complacency, where we take a look at our past, at what we've done, at where we've been, and we think—*Hey, I've come a long way already! I've made a lot of progress in my Christian walk. Look where I am compared to just a few years ago. Or, look where I am compared to other Christians I know. I'm way ahead of them; they have **real** problems, they struggle with sins that are never a problem for me.*

Congregation, there's a Christian who has lost his momentum; he has stopped running; he has stopped moving forward. His focus is no longer on Christ, on straining for perfection. His focus is on himself and on what he's accomplished. God's Word says that when he look at all that we have done, we are to count it all as rubbish; we are to look at what Christ has done in us!

Another possible meaning could be a person who looks backward at his life, at his past and cannot get beyond the guilt of his great sins and shortcomings. Maybe this is someone who's so paralyzed by his past failures that he cannot move forward, he cannot strive to live a holy life because he's overly fixated on his unworthiness, on his weakness, on his depravity.

He would be like a runner who is afraid to run a race simply because he remembers the pain and humiliation of falling in the last race, or how he was one of the poorest runners. A Christian who looks back like this fails to trust in the blood of Jesus Christ which washes away all our sin and guilt; he refuses to trust in the power of God's Spirit which helps us overcome past failures.

So instead of giving way to the temptation of pride and complacency, instead of being overcome by feelings of guilt and unworthiness, Paul says that he **presses on**, he strains toward what is ahead. The participle that is used for *straining* is very appropriate for this imagery of racing.

It describes a runner that is *stretching* and *straining* with his head and body leaning forward; it has to do with a runner exerting himself, straining every nerve and muscle in their body as he reaches for the finish line. If you've ever seen a 100 yard dash in a track meet, then you know exactly what it means to stretch for the finish line (many races are won by that final stretch).

Paul says this is how he runs (and we should run) the race for Christ. Here is the most surprising feature of our text. Notice that we are called to run the race, to exert ourselves, stretching and straining with all our might **not just at the end of the race**, and not just now and then at different points in the race, but every moment of every day, every step of the journey!

Certainly you've heard of people who live each day as if it were their last? That's precisely Paul's philosophy and approach to holiness. He lives everyday pressing on, straining and grasping for holiness; he's not content to slow down, to walk a few laps every now and then, or to sit down and take a breather.

No. He exerts himself mightily everyday; he is always and ever stretching and straining, striving and laboring with all his might to be Christ-like in all that he does, to be Christ-like in his thoughts, words and deeds. To be perfect, holy and righteous just as God has called him to be.

While Paul realizes that perfection is not possible this side of heaven, while he realizes that sin is always with us, that sin taints our every thought, motive and deed, that fact does not deter him in the least. As Christians, God has given us an upward call, a heavenward call to be like Christ.

So while we realize that we cannot reach perfection in this life (and we won't until Christ returns), we must not remain in our spiritual infancy, we must not flounder and wallow in spiritual immaturity and laziness. We are called by God to *progress* as Christians, to leave behind us the sin stretch and strain for the prize, to live like citizens of His heavenly kingdom (read Phil. 3.17-21; Phil 4:8).

That upward call, that heavenward call is for us to more and more leave behind us our life of sin, as Hebrews 12:1-2 says *let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily*

entangles, and let us run with perseverance, the race marked out before us; let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith...

Beloved, by His grace, God has granted us salvation in Jesus Christ His Son. That salvation came at the immeasurable expense of God's Son dying on the cross for our sins. So the prize for the Christian, the prize which Christ won for us is eternal fellowship and knowledge, eternal union and communion with our God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But that fellowship and knowledge, that union and communion with God starts right here and now. God calls us right here and right now to live in fellowship and union with Him and with Christ and with His Spirit.

This is what it means to *press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*. The question for us is this? Are we stretching and straining towards holiness? Are we making progress everyday in our sanctification--striving everyday to be like Christ? Are we exerting ourselves when it comes to our pursuit of holiness?

I know that we stretch and we strain when it comes to our obligations at work. We exert ourselves mightily when it comes to our job, when it comes to paying the bills, when it comes to working a little longer or harder to save money for vacation, for a new car, etc. So, we don't mind exerting ourselves when it comes to a reward like that.

We don't mind exerting ourselves when it comes to having fun. We press on, we stretch and strain ourselves, we make our lives very busy as we pursue our own pleasure and enjoyment. So we don't mind exerting ourselves when it comes to a reward like that.

But how often do we exert ourselves, how much are we willing to stretch and strain, to press forward when the prize and reward is to be more and more like Christ? I think we all know the answer to that.

We're reminded of the answer every time we fail to speak words of kindness and love, and we choose instead to speak words which are cruel, which tear people down and attack our neighbor. We are reminded of the answer every time we fail to keep our eyes, and our minds and our mouths and our bodies pure, and we give in to sinful desires and lusts.

We are reminded of the answer every time we fail to trust God and love God and have faith that He knows what is best, and instead we become angry at God and bitter towards Him, accusing God of injustice or unfairness.

In other words, congregation, we're constantly reminded (our consciences accuse us) that we don't exert ourselves enough, that we aren't pressing on toward holiness with as much fervor, with as much strength and determination as we should. We (I) need to run the race with more dedication and commitment, keeping our eyes, our mind, our focus on goal—Christlikeness!

So remember, beloved, God's Word call you and me to stretch and strain forward, to press on every moment of everyday, to press on every step of the race. But one thing we know, the race—the Christian life is a marathon, it's a long race, and all the runners fall down along the way. All the runners get tired and lose focus, and some even get lost along the way.

But the Good News is God in His grace still calls out to us. God in His grace and love comes and rescues us. He has sent His Comforter, His Counselor, His Holy Spirit to come along side us and give us aid; that Spirit refreshes us and strengthens us through the Word, the Spirit directs us and guides us in the way that we should go.

God is working through His Spirit right now, calling out to us, urging us, imploring us to get back on the path, to stay on the path; to run the race, to press on (stretching and straining) toward the Goal He has for us—that we might be more and more like Christ, growing everyday in our knowledge and fellowship with Him. Amen.