

Pressing on toward the Prize-Philippians 3-October 4, 2020

I don't know how many of you were runners or are still runners. I have attempted it at times in my life. I ran track in high school. I ran when I was single before I met my wife. I have tried to get back into it at various times in these last years, but I have had the hardest time sticking with it and I think I know the problem. I have been missing the prize necessary to motivate me since my track days. For some reason, simply losing weight is not it, maybe you can identify.

Without the prize, it has been too easy to say, "It is too early, I am too tired, it is too cold or rainy, it is too late." I don't know about you, but I have always admired those people who have the motivation enough to just run for the love of it, without the motivation of a prize.

My guess is probably a lot of you are more like me. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Now my question to you along that vein is do you ever have those same struggles in your spiritual life? I bet if I peered into the window of your spiritual life you have those same kinds of days, "It is too early, I am too tired, it is too cold or rainy, it is too late."

I must admit. I do too. I have some Sunday mornings where I wouldn't mind staying in bed. I have some nights where the draw of bed makes me speed up my prayers. I have always had good intentions of waking up first thing in the morning to God's Word, but find it slip down the list. Thankfully, I have the advantage of doing this for a living, so time can be found. It may be more challenging for you.

We know those are the things Jesus uses to feed our faith and encourage our soul. So what do we do when our flesh says no, to what the Holy Spirit of God would give an adamant yes to in our lives?

Well, one thing that helps me is to remember the prize waiting for my faith's pursuit. The prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. That upward call that also motivated and drove a key figure in the Bible, the apostle Paul.

For in our reading from Philippians today, we find the apostle Paul describing what continued to drive him as an apostle for Christ. It was the promise of Christ's righteousness given to him on account of his faith in Christ and the promise of resurrection in Christ.

It was of course the prize he didn't always know in his life. Prior to knowing Christ, Paul was doing plenty of running for a prize, but as he came to realize, the running he was doing was an empty pursuit. He describes in the first verses of Philippians 3 his former life before He came to know Christ. He described how he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee zealous for upholding God's law, even persecuting Christians out of zeal for his Jewish faith.

As to righteousness under the law, he says he was blameless. Paul was striving for the prize of God's righteousness, a righteous standing before Him and he thought it was earned by his blameless obedience to the law of God and it sounds like by Paul's description of his life that he was doing pretty well toward that goal.

The impression from Paul's words about his life is he did not skip out on his Scripture study or let other things come before it. He didn't have a Saturday where he wasn't observing the Sabbath and taking that time for the Lord. He was diligent in prayer and worship.

But as Paul came to see, in his own words, **“But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish or garbage, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”**

Paul came to realize all those pursuits of his old life in Judaism were empty, fruitless pursuits, that whatever was his gain by doing those things, accounted to nothing in the end, compared with knowing Christ because Jesus was his righteousness and salvation before God.

He came to see that **“he did not have a righteousness of his own that came through the law, but God's righteousness was given to His faith in Christ.**

Faith is what puts us on the track to receive the prize of God's righteousness offered us in Christ and the forgiveness of sins offered us in Him. A track we would have never stepped a foot upon outside of God's grace and the Holy Spirit opening our eyes to see the prize of God's righteousness, His eternal favor, is found in the one who has already run the race for us. Jesus.

He is the only one whose finish of death did not end in a permanent grave for his body, but gave way to the victory of His resurrection and it was that victory that then drove Paul from there on out. He wasn't running in faith to earn God's righteousness because he knew he couldn't, but he was running in faith with the new motivation of receiving the prize already won for Him at the end of His race through Christ and His resurrection. Even running through suffering for Christ, so that by all possible means, he said, **I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”**

It is what he describes as not yet sharing in, because he had not yet died, but he was pressing on toward that goal to make it His own, saying, **“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

It was that upward call of God in Christ Jesus, the promise of resurrection that drove him to live each day in faith and gratitude towards Christ, forgetting his former life and what he thought it was earning him and pressing forward for the prize already won for Him in Christ.

It is where when we fix our eyes on the prize won for us already in Christ and what it cost our Lord to give it to us, it can be our motivation to press on in faith and prayer and devotion and worship when our flesh would tell us otherwise, or to press on with love and forgiveness and a heart for helping others when our we do not feel the motivation to do so.

It is like this week I was reading for this sermon an article online that was entitled, “8 Great Motivating Messages that Guide Superstar Athletes.” The top one mentioned was “do it for love.” Evidently the famous NBA basketball coach Phil Jackson, would emphasize that with his teams. In his book “Eleven Rings”, he shared how he would try to get his players to focus on something greater than themselves that they loved and valued. When they were doing it for

others, as much as themselves, he found that often produced the necessary motivation to drive success.

The reason to get up and worship Christ shouldn't be because it will tip the scales in your favor toward earning God's righteousness. The reason to pray shouldn't be because it is depositing you points you will one day cash in towards heaven. The reason to take the time to read God's Word shouldn't be because it will show God what a good person of faith you are. That is thinking God's righteousness, his prize, can be earned, when it was never meant to be, nor can it be.

But when we are given the eyes of faith, like Paul, to run our race for the love of Christ and gratitude for the upward call promised us in His resurrection, then it can change our perspective towards those things. When we don't look at them so much as obligations, but as things meant to aid us in our race toward the prize of eternal life in Christ, it can give us a different type of motivation.

When we look at prayer as an opportunity to talk to our Savior and receive his strength from it. What a joy! When we look at worship or Bible study or our devotions as time to spend with Jesus, whose love and sacrifice means our eternal gain, it might just give us the motivation to do it more often. We can look at those things as like the sunrise or clear crisp air for a runner that might be what is the difference between staying in bed or enjoying the run.

Christ already has a spot for you at the finish line of this life. You have a prize to run for, and while there can be many voices within us and outside us, trying to take your eyes off that prize, we can run looking forward to Christ's loving embrace at the end of it and his words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Your race is finished. The prize of my everlasting life is now yours. Enjoy it for all of eternity." Amen.

What motivated Paul in His spiritual life-the prize.

. He had grew up learning that the prize was completely dependent upon how well He ran his race of obedience to God through His law. If he failed, it would be catastrophic. It is what drove him in his life and by his own testimony, if anyone was running his race not to fail to get that prize, it was Paul.