

WPC
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Citizens of Heaven
Philippians 3:12-16; 3:17-4:1

As we continue our series of sermons on the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, last week, we looked at how Paul confronts the issue of legalism and argues against those who insisted that in order to truly have God's salvation, one must first become a Jew by being circumcised. In doing so, Paul draws upon his own experience as a Jew to make his case, reminding the Philippians of his high pedigree.

Paul then points out that all of his accomplishments, all of his special Jewish credentials, he counts as trash when it comes to obtaining the favor of God. Far from disdaining his past, Paul shows how valuable it was to him. However, for Paul, "his consuming desire was to know Jesus Christ, to be in Jesus Christ; and for the surpassing worth of that, he counts gain as loss. Paul doesn't toss away junk to gain Christ; he tosses away that which was of tremendous value to him. What Paul is saying is that Christ surpasses everything of worth to him." (Fred Craddock, p. 58). He reminds us that salvation doesn't rest with us but with God.

As we pick up with today's text, Paul starts the next section of his letter with a disclaimer in v. 12 - he hasn't reached any sort of perfection in his spiritual life, and he hasn't fully understood who Christ is. Like us, he's still on a journey of faith. He describes this journey with an athletic image: of a runner who 'presses on'; continually striving to know Christ fully.

Fred Craddock remarks, "faith for Paul involved running, wrestling, striving, and fighting, none of which would end until the day of Christ. We must remember that for Paul all that effort was not for merit but was rather the activity of one who had abandoned all claim to merit. Trust in God's grace ...set him free now to run without watching his feet, without counting his steps, without competing with other servants of Christ." (Craddock, 61)

What's at stake here is the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14). "In pursuit of that prize Paul not only strains forward but he forgets what lies behind" (Craddock, 62). Here we sense some tension between what Paul is saying now and what he said earlier when he was sharing autobiographically. It's clear that Paul has not really forgotten his past. In fact, he's quite proud of it. Yet it's also clear that he's not stuck in the past, but running towards the future God has in store for him.

Two passages from Isaiah demonstrate this same tension. Within a space of three chapters, the same author quotes God as saying: "Remember

the former things of old" (Is. 46:9a); and then, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing..." (Is. 43: 18-19a).

As Christians, we're called both to forget the past and to remember the past. First, forgetting the past: Author and speaker Brennan Manning tells the story of a woman who visited her priest and told him that when she prays, she sees Jesus in a vision.

"He appears to me as real as you are standing here right now, Father," said the woman. "And he speaks to me. He tells me that he loves me and wants to be with me. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Not at all," replied the priest. "But to make sure it is really Jesus who is visiting you, I want you to ask him a question when he appears to you again. Ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him in confession. Then come back and tell me what he said."

A few days later the woman returned.

"Did you have another vision of Jesus?" the priest inquired of her.

"Yes, I did Father," she replied.

"And did you ask him to tell you the sins that I confessed to him while I was in confession?"

"Yes I did," the woman answered.

“And what did he tell you?” asked the priest expectantly.

“He said...’I forgot.’”¹

In other words, our sins of yesterday have been forgiven. Nobody has been keeping score, and that's indeed good news. We don't need to be tied down by our past – God offers us true forgiveness and healing.

Paul's mind is not upon earth but upon heaven; he says that our citizenship is in heaven. Paul's use of this word would have been "especially meaningful in Philippi with its high patriotism as a Roman colony. We are, says Paul, a colony of heaven." (Craddock, 69) Therefore, we should not allow our connection to this world to prevent us from striving to reach our real heavenly home.

However, Paul does not want the Philippians to focus exclusively on heaven and ignore life on earth. Nor does he want for them to be anti-historical. We do need to “remember the things of old” so that we can learn from our history.

Forgetting the past in the way Paul talks about means not being bogged down by our past so we can always keep our eyes on God's promise of eternal life while at the same time engaging the culture in which we live. In other words, "we should not erase completely the memory." (Craddock,

¹ “A Vision of Jesus,” More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks, p. 27.

63) Worship itself is an act of memory. Forgiveness does not mean that our past is canceled out, it means that our past is *resolved*. But there may very well still be scars or injuries from our past.

For instance, Paul actively encouraged the stoning of Stephen. While Paul later experienced the transforming power of God's forgiveness, that didn't change the fact that Stephen had died. But there is resolution in Paul's life. He still has to live with the consequences from his former life, but now he is able to press on toward the goal of the heavenly prize.

I know I'm in Husky territory here, but I want to share with you a story about a University of Oregon football player. On September 3 of this year, the Oregon football team was defeated by Boise State, but the night is remembered less for the game itself than for the ugly postgame incident that followed. When taunted by a Boise State defensive end, Oregon running back LaGarrette Blount floored him with a right to the jaw. Blount then made things worse by arguing with Boise State fans on his way off the field and had to be restrained by his own coaches. A day later, he was suspended for the season.

Even though he was provoked, Blount's actions were wrong, as he realized later that evening when he had calmed himself down. The next day Blount called his coach at home and asked if he could call the Boise coach

and the player he punched to apologize to them. In addition to supplementing his phone calls with written apologies, he also wrote a letter of apology to Oregon's student paper, *The Daily Emerald*, as well as working with at-risk youth this fall.

No one but Blount can know for sure if his display of remorse is genuine. But on the surface, it seemed genuine enough for Blount to be reinstated by the Pac 10 conference this past week. Yesterday, he was eligible to play in a game vs. Arizona St., although he was not put into the game. He's been forgiven and restored, but he has to live with the consequences of his actions. He can't take back that punch, and so he'll continue to carry a reputation he doesn't want, but which opposing fans will surely remind him of every time he steps on the field.

He'll bear the scars of his past actions with him for the rest of his life, but his past actions do not have to cripple his ability to move on with his life. He's been reinstated and has rejoined his team. He can go on with his life. Earlier this week he issued a statement: "I'm grateful to Coach Kelly that he cares enough to offer me this second chance. Now it is up to me to prove to people that their lasting impressions of me are not what they saw in Boise."

Christians are able to face this tension between remembering the past and at the same time forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to

what lies ahead because of what Christ has done for us through his life, death, and resurrection.

There's an old saying, "I know not what my future holds, but I know who holds the future." Because we are in God's hands, we can remember our past but not be bound by our past.

Thanks be to God that our past, our present, and our future are in his hands. Amen.