

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas. Traditionally on this Sunday between Christmas and New year's, I give a brief sermon and then we open up the mic for a time of testimonies from all of you. It can be an opportunity to reflect on something you went through or that God taught you in the past year, or to look ahead in hope to 2022. It can also be an opportunity for those of you who have been reading through the Bible this year to share what that experience meant to you, or something in particular you took away from your trip through the Bible. I want to begin by reading Philippians 3:1-14, part of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. I have always found this passage to be particularly relevant at New Year's. Let's read the passage:

Philippians 3:1-6 - Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh-- ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Paul begins by warning them about false teachers who are trying to convince them that a right relationship with God includes more than faith in Jesus, but also depends upon observing the Jewish law, particularly the circumcision laws. He tells them that if righteousness depended upon observing the law, then he would be head and shoulders above any of them. But salvation is only found in trusting in Jesus' life, death and resurrection for our sins, not in Jesus plus anything – Jesus plus good works, Jesus plus speaking in tongues, Jesus plus baptism, Jesus plus the sacraments, or even Jesus plus belonging to a specific church or denomination.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Continuing in v. 7:

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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.

Paul tells them his spiritual resume not only counts for nothing, but it only gets in the way of his preeminent desire now, which is to know Jesus more. This is because Paul knows that those who think they are good people with a great spiritual resume are actually in the most danger, because they think they can stand before a holy God on the basis of their own good works or family history instead of trusting in Christ. He goes as far as to say that his spiritual resume is rubbish, skubalon, dog excrement. He knows that salvation is not by his resume, not by his good works, that his righteousness or right relationship with God comes only by faith in Jesus.

All he wants is to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and to share in his suffering.

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.

Paul says he forgets what is behind and strains towards what is ahead. First thing that comes to mind is forgetting the negative parts of the past, the things that have weighed us down. Or maybe it's forgetting your sins, and trusting that they are forgiven, that you are right with God. Making a conscious effort to leave those things in the past and begin the year focused on Jesus.

But in Paul's case, the main thing he is referring to is forgetting the levels he has already reached in his walk with the Lord. It's like the team saying "0-0" after scoring a goal. Do not become complacent. Press on to the prize of knowing Christ and having eternal life.

***Acts 6:3-4** - Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

Consider how the writer of Hebrews puts it:

Hebrews 12:1-2 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great 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 for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, the one who died for you, and run the race with perseverance.