

Focus on the Future and Leave the Past Behind

Half-Truth #9

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The pastor was making an impassioned plea to the church board about changes he said needed to be made “to bring the congregation into the 20th century.” The associate pastor leaned over and whispered, “I think you the 21st century.” The pastor responded, “no, I mean the 20th. Let’s try to move ahead one century at a time.” Well, friends, I certainly believe CBC is in the 21st century. We have been there the last 3 years...just kidding. Yet, next will mark our 115 anniversary as a congregation. 115 years! Wow! My mind goes back over the past 28 years that I have been pastor here and all the people that have been an important part of my life. Many of the folks are still here. Maybe sitting in this room right now. Others have moved on to another location. And for more than a few, their new location is their eternal home in heaven. Names like Gordy and Joanne, Van and Marlys, Wayne and Joanne, Harold Ginger, Bud and Myna, Bob and Delores, and numerous others always bring me warm and fond memories.

Others of you may be thinking, “Yeah, 115 years is kind of cool, but I am not sure it is what I need to be thinking about. After all, those folks from 115 years ago, they are all...dead. This world seems to be going crazy right now, and I have got plenty of stuff going on in my own life. I really think we need to focus on a faith that can help us today and not just enjoy a walk down memory lane. After all, the past is ...past.” Well, folks, I think a 115 anniversary is a great time to think about how God can use the past to strengthen us for the future. Let’s pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear, understand, believe and obey as he speaks to us through his word today.

The past can play a positive role in our lives, yet, it can also have a negative impact. The most obvious seems to be when people’s past mistakes or sins hang over them like a dark cloud. They can be overwhelmed by guilt or they may let the past define them and fail to recognize or do what the Lord is calling them to do. I suspect you know

someone like that or maybe you see someone like that in the mirror. Now, it is often true that the past cannot be undone and sometimes there are consequences for our sins that continue for years and even decades. Yet, guilt and shame about the past does not have to infect our lives. We see that in the apostle Paul. He is often called Saint Paul. But he did some nasty things. Before he became a Christian he was a Jewish religious leader and though Jesus Christ was a dangerous, false Messiah. He was working to have Christians arrested and even killed. And then he met Jesus, the risen Lord, as he was traveling to the city of Damascus. At that point, everything changed. It is perhaps the most spectacular, 180 degree turn in human history. Paul became an apostle of Jesus Christ. The man who was the great persecutor of the Christian church, became its greatest proponent. So how, did Paul deal with his past sins?

Well, he didn’t pretend nothing happened or that it was no big deal. In *1 Timothy 1:15b* writes ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-of whom I am the worst.*** He does not sugarcoat anything. But...I do not believe Paul struggled with guilt or shame because of his past. He was convinced in both his mind and heart, that *Romans 5:1* ***Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*** And that *Romans 8:1* ***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*** He was confident that what the apostle John wrote was completely true. *1 John 1:9* ***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*** He believed what God said in *Isaiah 43:25* ***“I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”*** And thus Paul agreed with what David, another great sinner, said in *Psalms 103:12* ***as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.***

Many of you have heard at least some of those verses before. They speak of the amazing grace God pours into the lives of those trusting in Jesus Christ. People who grasp and believe this truth are not bogged down by guilt and shame. No matter what they have done or who they have been in their past. And this truth is not just something for people who lived a long time ago. Many of you know my brother Tim's story. He shared it a couple of years ago at our adult retreat. He had served as pastor of his church for 24 years, and then, because of sexual immoral behavior, he had to resign. At that point his wife and children (all young adults) decided they were done, wanted nothing to do people learned he had blatantly sinned against his church, his family, and against God, he realized there was someone who would never abandon him. That was his father, his heavenly father. That night as he confessed his sins, not just with his lips, but in his heart, he knew God had forgiven him. He knew those verses we read a few minutes ago were true. He knew Jesus went to the cross for all his sins, including his immortality. His sins were forgiven and he was cleaned from all unrighteousness.

Now, Tim still deals with the consequences of his sin. Though he and his wife worked on being reconciled, they ended up getting divorced. His relationship with all 4 of his adult children is very strained. Various people are not willing to forgive Time for what he did or do not believe God has forgiven him for what he did. Sometimes he is tempted to let guilt and shame seep into his soul. But, he knows, he is a recipient of God's amazing, saving, cleansing grace and he does not need to let his past, his past sin and mistakes, define who he is.

Yet, folks, it is not only our past failures that can get us into trouble. We can also be tripped up by past successes. In ***Philippians 3:13 But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.*** Friends, in this verse Paul is not talking about getting stuck in past failures, but about allowing past accomplishments to keep him from ***3:14 press(ing) on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me.*** The apostle Paul had climbed to the top of the ladder of success, only to learn that ladder

was leading against the wrong wall. Within Judaism Paul might have won the Nobel prize, but he realized that 1st century Judaism was totally missing the boat by focusing on religious rituals and refusing to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. Yet, even when the ladder is leaning against the right wall, it can be dangerous to focus on past success. People can fall in the trap of "resting on one's laurels." That ladder term refers to the wreath made of green leaves the Romans gave to the victors in a race. Someone said, *resting on your laurels is as dangerous as resting when you are walking in a snowstorm.* You doze off and die in your sleep. Sometimes people use past successes as an excuse to be careless or lazy. It is good to remember that yesterday's awards usually have little significance today. I am pretty big football fan, but I cannot tell you who won the super bowl even 3 years ago, unless I google it. The fellow who wears the t-shirt, "employee of the month, April 1997" may have good memories of that honor, but no one else really cares.

Resting on past successes can be especially dangerous in our spiritual lives. When someone tells me, "I used to be really involved at the church" I learn something about that persons past involvement, and also something about his/her current spiritual condition. Of course, church involvement is just one aspect of spiritual health. I sometimes find myself thinking, "oh, I have read the bible many times. I know what it says. Is it really a big deal if I skip my devotional time today? What about right now? Do I love the Lord and desire to honor him at this moment? In ***1 Corinthians 10:12***, the apostle Paul warns us ***let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.*** I think that is a warning about resting on spiritual laurels. Failure to "take heed" probably explains how king David could be a man after God's own heart at one point, and then plot to murder Uriah to cover up his affair with Bathsheba. When I think of how seemingly Godly Christian leaders, men like Ravi Zacharias, have fallen into sexual and other types of serious sin, I wonder if they were focused on past success and kind of resting on their laurels.

Being focused on the success of the past can also have a negative impact on a church's ministry. A

couple of years ago I visited with some people from another congregation and when I asked them about their church, they told me about all the wonderful ministry things that happened in the 70's! Now, I liked the 70's. those were my high school and college years. But they are 40 plus years ago. I got the impression they may have not been doing much ministry since that time. Again, just like an individual, it does not matter very much what a church did last year, 10 years ago, 40 years ago or 115 years ago. What really matters are whether a church is seeking to love God, love others, and make disciples today. When folks in a church become preoccupied with nostalgia, looking back on the good old days and focusing on past successes, they often miss opportunities the Lord has for them today. For one thing, they might get stuck in ministry styles from the past. Folks, the gospel of Jesus Christ is an unchanging message, but how to best communicate that message varies from culture to culture. And though in many ways I wish things were like they were 50 years ago, the fact is they are not. To be a faithful and effective ambassador of Jesus Christ means we cannot pretend they are.

Ok, P.D., we do not want to get tripped up by our past failures or successes. It seems like it is a pretty good idea to just forget about the past, focus on the present and look towards the future. Well, that might seem to be a good idea, but it is not. If used in the right way, our past can strengthen our souls and help us become more and more the people God wants us to be.

We can benefit from both past failures and successes. There is much we can learn from mistakes. Otto Von Bismarck said, "a fool can learn from his own mistakes. A Wiseman leans from the mistakes of others." The bible encourages us to do that. In 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul talks about the experience of the people of Israel in the wilderness following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, about 1300 years before the birth of Jesus. He tells them to remember that what should have been maybe a 40-day journey across the Sinai desert into the promise land took them 40 years, because of their sin and lack of trust in the Lord. Paul says, folks, learn from that. **1Corinthians 10:11 Now these**

things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Remember, what happened in the past, let that help you avoid the same mistakes those people made. In fact, from Geniuses to Revelation, the bible contains lessons and warnings to us from the past. Do not be like Eve in **Gen 3**, who doubted God's word and experienced horrible consequences when she disobeyed him. Or do not be like the church in **Ephs in Revelation 2**, who despot many strengths had "lost their first love" for the Lord. Everymen we read the bible it is good to ask ourselves, "does this passage contain some warning from the past about sin or mistakes we need to avoid?"

Of course, there are plenty of mistakes that have been made since the bible was written that we can learn from as well. If the captain of the Titanic had not forgotten to pack his binoculars, that ship might not have hit an iceberg and sunk. If someone had not misread a zero as a 6, the distance from the baseball pitching mound to home plate would be 60 feet, rather than 60 feet, 6 inches. From these I learn to always make sure I pack what is needed, especially reading glasses.

Of course, we can and should learn from our own mistakes as well. Because he had fallen into sexual sin my brother realized he needed to get some counseling and he knew he needed to have accountability partners who would encourage him to stay on the right path. Some of us have learned important lessons from financial mistakes we have made, from relationship mistakes we have made, from job and career mistakes we have made. There are many ways we can benefit by looking back at our past, and asking God to help us learn from our mistakes and avoid them in the future. Or as someone said, "there is no sense making mistakes, if you cannot learn from them."

But the past offers us much more than warnings. We can also be encouraged as we look at the past and see how the Lord has protected and provided for his people. How he enables them to trust and follow him, even in the most difficult circumstances. **Psalm 103:2 says, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, Hebrews 11** is one of my favorite chapters in the

bible, sometimes call the faith hall of fame. The God inspired author of that book recounts wonderful stories of how men and women of faith experienced God's grace and faithfulness. He starts with Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abe, ***Hebrews 11:13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.*** Wow, I find that an inspiring reminder that this world is not our home. We need to learn to find hope and joy in the promises of God, even though we may not experience their fulfillment until heaven.

Both the bible and church history are full of inspiring stories of how people have experienced God's grace and faithfulness in their lives. I would suggest that if you want to grow in your Christian faith, to become more like Jesus, one of the best ways to use your time besides reading the bible, is to read biography's. There are so many amazing stories' out there. Richard Wurmbrand's "tortured for Christ," which I read when I was in high school, and Edith Schaeffer's "L'abri," I read that in seminary, read 2 books that left deep imprints on my soul that still impact me today.

And then there are stories from ordinary people you know, stories of God's extraordinary faithfulness. One that sticks in my mind concerned Pastor Walton and Eunice Johnson, some of you knew them, they were Jim Anderson's uncle and aunt. Walton served as the pastor of numerous congregations, including a time as the interim pastor here in Chisholm in the 1980s. Anyway, at Walton's funeral a few years ago, his son Paul recalled a number of times when his mom, Eunice, served he and his siblings lunch and then had them pray that the Lord would provide something for supper, since the fridge and cupboards were empty. And Paul told how God, in some way, always provided food for their family and that was such a faith builder for him. Friends, I do not know about you, but there has always been food in our fridge and cupboards. I always try to remember to thank the Lord for the food we have, but he always provided it well ahead of time. Yet, Paul Johnson's little story continues to be a vivid reminder to me of ***Psalm 34:10 The lions may grow weak and***

hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Nancy and I were in WI 2 weeks ago for the 100th anniversary of Lakeside Baptist Church, the congregation I served as pastor before coming to Chisholm, we heard multiple stories of how the Lord had used that church to transform people's lives...in a good way. I hope that at our homecoming Sunday next week you get to hear and share some of those types of stories as well.

Remembering the past, learning from the past, recounting how God has worked in the past, is something God has called his people to do for a long time. Joshua 24 tells the story of how the people of Israel finally crossed the Jordan River, after 40 years in the wilderness, and entered into the promise land of Canaan. After everyone had crossed, the Lord commanded that one man from each of the 12 tribes retrieve a stone from the middle of the river and build a monument with those 12 stones. Then the people are given these instructions. ***Joshua 4:21-24 When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'what do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.***

Friends, the Lord does not want us to get stuck in the past. He does not want us to be burdened by past mistakes and sins. He does not want us to try to coast through life on past successes. But he does want us to remember the past, to learn from the past, to heed warning and most importantly to be encouraged as we are reminded of the amazing grace and great faithfulness God demonstrated to his people from generation to generation, including here at CBC for the past 115 years. Let's celebrate as we close with a wonderful hymn, "great is thy faithfulness."