

“Forget the Past - Focus on Christ” By Pastor Steve Sommerer  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost October 4, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon text is from our Epistle lesson from Philippians chapter 3:

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. 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. So far the text.

Before Christ converted Saul on the Damascus road, he thought he was doing God’s work by helping kill Christians like Stephen. He took great pride in his ethnic heritage as a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee and was proud to be more dedicated than the rest. He devoted his life to living under the Law and trying to keep it perfectly.

But his rigorous religious program – his zeal for destroying the church – all the priorities of his early life faded away when the Risen Christ appeared to Him on the Damascus Road. All that used to puff Paul up with great pride, now became his shame and a cause for repentance and crying out to God for forgiveness. He discovered the truth: all his trust in the way he had conducted his life, not only didn’t help Paul to be saved; rather, they condemned him. Paul’s trust was in Paul.

But after that life-changing encounter with the Living Lord where Jesus appeared to Paul in a blinding light, Paul said, *“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”* He says basically, “I was wrong. My good works don’t mean a thing. Nothing else in my life matters. The only thing that matters is Jesus.”

It reshaped his life and worldview. No longer would he chase after a righteousness of his own. No longer would he concentrate his life on his own goodness and works, but he strove from that day forward through blessings or struggles to focus his life and hope and heart’s trust on Christ, the Church’s One Foundation. He learned to trust in a righteousness that comes from God and is given us freely through faith in Jesus: *“I consider [my former works] rubbish, that I may gain Christ 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.”*

It should be very clear, according to Scripture, that if you build your life, hope, focus, and eternal future on worldly things, whether entertainment or work or family, then with those perishable things you, too, will be consumed in the Judgment. In this life, you can’t serve two masters – *“You can’t serve God and money.”* Any other foundation than Christ our Lord must go down to the fires of hell *“where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* Simply put there’s no place for pride on Judgment Day, no pride in our goodness, our church attendance, our power and position as respected members and

leaders in the church. In Galatians 6, Paul said it simply and beautifully, *“May I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

So, here’s Dr. Paul’s prescription for us who have yet to wake up; his prescription for us who know where our life’s focus ought to be, but so often worship false gods like self, family, money, jobs, entertainments and amusements. “Stop looking at yourselves!” I think Paul is saying. “Stop living for a world that’s dying, and stop storing up for yourselves treasures here on earth – even if the treasures you’re storing are the good merits you think buy you brownie points with God.” The righteousness that you and I need comes from outside of you. It comes as a gift from God. *“I consider all things rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own, but that which is through faith in Christ.”*

Our Introit reminds us, *“This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes.”* Only in the face of Christ the Crucified do you see heaven’s answer for your self-absorbed, mis-directed lives. The perfect life Jesus lived, was lived in your place. Because you and I can’t and don’t, He stepped in to do what only God in the flesh could do. That’s the righteousness that Paul, and we, hold on to. Jesus carried your unrighteousness, your sins, to Calvary, and clothes you in His own perfect robes of righteousness. And for you and I who are clothed in a *“righteousness not our own”* we forget what’s behind and strain forward, *“pressing on to the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

By the Spirit’s power through faith, you have been baptized into our Lord Jesus and wrapped around in a righteousness not your own. When your Heavenly Father looked upon His Son at the cross, He was covered in your sins. Now, when God looks at you through faith in Jesus, God the Father sees His baptized children – you and me – covered in the robe of Jesus’ righteousness and cleansed in Christ’s blood.

That’s your Christian hope and calling – *“The upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* With that hope of heaven in your future, serve God, disciplining your bodies, *“becoming like Jesus in His death, that by any means possible we attain the resurrection from the dead.”* As Paul notes, we are not already perfect – we are forgiven; we are justified. That means we are declared righteous; and for us who are declared righteous by His grace, we make it our life’s goal to serve Him with the people and in the places God puts us.

You didn’t start this work yourself. Faith is a gift. The Holy Spirit created it. He daily strengthens your faith as He feeds us in His Word. Joined to Jesus in a living faith, nothing is more certain that God’s forgiveness and salvation, because God doesn’t lie. Jesus said, *“Whoever believes in me has eternal life.”* For a child of God who rests in Jesus there is no reason for us to live in fear of the future. When you rest in Jesus, you don’t need to live fearful of your future. A few years ago, I visited with a Roman Catholic woman at the nursing home and we talked about the joy of heaven, and she said, “Well, we all hope we end up there”, kind of a thing. No. Jesus took hold of you. No need to doubt His strong arms. He said, *“Nothing can snatch you from My hand.”*

Paul wrote: *“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.”* Hear that. Let that re-shape your understanding of what and who you are called to be as a Christian. Let it change your priorities. Let it set your house in order. *“Press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of you.”* You could never earn your salvation by

works, but you can squander and forfeit it through laziness and unbelief. As God's forgiven children, God wants you to be different – wants to use you to impact your family – to impact your friends and this world every moment until He comes again, *“forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.”*

Far too often we Christians look at our lives, our church or Sunday school, and other opportunities to serve and we complain and moan. We may get so frustrated we give up – let somebody else do it. Sinful, lazy frustration may even cause us to skip through life looking for the perfect church or wife or husband or kids, rather than working to serve God's purpose where He plants us. You are *“God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”* Maybe that's bringing kids or grandkids to Sunday school or volunteering with the Sunday school or praying and pledging for the Rescue mission or helping with the youth group. Maybe it's being a helpful, loving neighbor or friend or inviting that friend who doesn't go to church to come along and sit with you. Maybe it's calling or sending cards to a shutin or sitting with an elderly saint to relieve a weary caregiver.

Rooted in the certainty of a righteousness not our own – covered in the blood of Jesus, we are called to *“Strain toward what is ahead. Forget what's behind.”* Jesus is the Savior and the perfect Model. He had a goal. Christ strained toward His goal of rescuing and redeeming you into a restored relationship with God so you could share His home in heaven. Because He successfully accomplished His goal, burying our sins in an empty tomb and rising from the dead, what lies in our future is assured.

You don't have to live life dwelling on the sin-scarred failures of the past or puffing up with pride over some good work that could never be good enough. We forget what's behind and declare it all rubbish, *“that we may be found in Christ Jesus through faith, not having a righteousness of our own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith.”*

And now may the peace of God which surpasses human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.