



# Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

**Phil. 3:1-14**

With the new year just a few days away, I would like us to focus our thoughts on the future. On what God may have for us in 2008.

I want to direct your thoughts to the thoughts of the apostle Paul as he faced the prospects for his future. Beginning in verse 12 of Philippians chapter 3, Paul shares what we might call his “personal outlook” on his future. When we think of who he is, and what he has accomplished as a Christian, it’s quite amazing:

*<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

It is certainly clear that Paul did not feel that he had “arrived spiritually” nor that he was planning to slack off or be satisfied with his current level of spiritual attainment. No, he was “pressing on” a term he uses twice in these three verses. Pressing on *“toward the goal to win the prize.”* What is that goal, what is that prize? I think it is best summed up in verse 8, with Paul’s own words: *<sup>8</sup>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.*

There are many things that distinguish a Christian - one who follows Christianity - from those who follow other forms of religion or spirituality. But the most significant distinction is this: because Christians believe that Jesus rose again from the dead, therefore *He lives today to be known by those who believe in him.* The Jesus who was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, who lived, who died, and who rose again, still lives. Consequently, to know him personally, intimately, and experientially is the first and greatest goal of the believer’s life. This was Paul’s goal. Having been saved wholly and solely by Christ, Paul wants to enter into the deepest possible union with Him. He knew him, of course, but his goal was to know him better.

## The “Main Thing”

Someone has said, I think it was Stephen Covey, that *“The Main Thing is to Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing.”* Once you stop keeping the main thing the main thing, it really doesn’t matter what you’re doing, or how busy or involved you are - because you’re not doing the main thing. As we approach a new year, I want us to spend time this morning thinking about what that Main Thing is and from Phil 3, see what we can do to keep it the “Main Thing” in our lives, and an opportunity to make a commitment to God to do that in 2008.

Now, we have seen from Paul, that the main thing for every Christian to know him personally, intimately, and in a continually growing way.

Maybe I am wrong, but I think I am safe in saying that, unlike Paul, many Christians give up on “striving toward that goal” and fall into a “spiritual complacency” in their lives.

An Englishman named Parkinson wrote a humorous book on the functioning of corporations called *Parkinson’s Law*. In it he describes a disease that corporations get, which he calls *injelititis*, where through incompetence there sets in a corporate-wide paralysis, complacency or the absence of the urge to shoot high.

I wonder if something that kind is not found in the lives of many Christians. A disease of spiritual apathy and complacency. I think spiritual *injelititis* is found widely. It may be found in you. Have you lost your vision for God's future blessing on your life? Or have you ceased to work hard in his service? Do you no longer have that desire to know Jesus intimately? Or to awake with him in the morning and to live each day with him and in his presence?

If so, you have caught the disease.

### **What happens when Jesus is no longer our Main Thing?**

**1. Sin becomes more appealing.** I can tell you this from experience

**2. The things of the world become more attractive. - v.8**

And the things of God less attractive.

- no longer worshipping from you inmost being
- serving is a chore or you give up on it
  - you've done your part, now it someone elses turn.
- material things, worldly pursuits occupy more and more of your time.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace.

What does Paul teach us? What is God's Remedy?

### **I. THE FIRST PRINCIPLE IS THAT YOU MUST BEGIN BY BECOMING A CHRISTIAN. - v. 9**

It may seem obvious to say this, but it is true. And it is my experience that at least two types of people need to face this squarely.

The first type is those who are not Christians and know it - and therefore they don't have a relationship with Christ.

The second type is composed of those who are not Christians, but who think they are, perhaps because they have been raised in a religious home or because they attend church. They think they are Christians, but they do not understand the heart of

the gospel and have not actually committed their lives to Jesus. Hence, they cannot understand their failure to experience the fruits of such commitment. If you are this type of person, you must also begin by becoming a Christian.

Let me explain what Paul says in v.9 it as plainly as I am able. Before you become a Christian you stand before God as one who has fallen short of his standards. You come to him with your good works and all of your best traits of character. But as you stand before God you realize that even the best of these things is imperfect and thus is a failure to God. You hear God say, "*All that stuff you bring is tainted by sin. It is no good. You must turn from it.*"

So you lay these things aside. You count them as loss, and you come to the cross to receive God's righteousness. You say to God, "*I admit that everything I do falls short of your standard, and I recognize your verdict on it. I lay it aside. I do not deserve anything from you, but I come empty-handed to receive what you have promised to give through faith in Jesus Christ. I come to receive your righteousness by which I am accounted righteous. I come to receive the Holy Spirit by whom I will have power to live the Christian life. I ask you to help me to live it for Jesus' sake. Amen.*"

If you have done that, you have taken the first step to experiencing the fellowship with God through Christ that is to characterize the Christian life.

### **II. REMEMBER THE GREATNESS OF JESUS**

When you think about it, the only way we can become complacent about our relationship with Jesus Christ is to *lose our minds*. That's right, it's to become "spiritually stupid."

But sad to say, it's not that hard to do. Yet, when you stop and think about it, to become complacent about the greatest opportunity in the world that anyone could ever have, and we have it every day, is amazing. And it's because somehow we can take for granted what is so marvelous and amazing and wonderful.

In verse 8, Paul puts it like this: "*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...*"

You see, it wasn't that sin didn't have an appeal to Paul. It wasn't that the things of the world didn't have their attraction. It was that *compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ* they lost their attraction, they lost their appeal.

Now Paul never lost focus of the greatness of Christ, but we do. If you've turn back to chapter 2, we will look at it a bit.

**Philippians 2:5-11** *<sup>5</sup>Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,*

*<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

*<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

*<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

### III. PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE - vv. 13-14

Paul says that if we are going to keep Jesus the Main Thing, then we to learn to press ahead in two ways. First, we forget those things that are behind. Second, we look forward to those things that are ahead. In Paul's mind there was a *sanctified forgetting*, a *sanctified looking ahead*, if we are going to win the prize, keeping Jesus first.

#### Forgetting the Past

In the first place, Paul says that he forgets those things that are behind. What are they? Well, he certainly did not forget his knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine; this letter proves that. Some of the greatest truths of the Christian faith are given in this very chapter.

And he certainly did not forget God's grace and God's great mercies, because he has been talking about them throughout the letter. He knew that all he had to value in his life came through the grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ.

No, this is the kind of forgetting that occurs when we cease to let things that are in the past overshadow the present -- that lets the past be past, both the good and the bad, and that constantly looks forward to the work that God still has for us.

There is an illustration of the opposite of this attitude in the Old Testament. When God led the people of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, he provided everything that they needed for their journey. They had shade by day and light by night. They had water to drink and manna to eat. The time came, however, when the people ceased to look forward to the land that God was giving them and instead looked back to their life in Egypt. They said, "*We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!*" (Num. 11:5–6). The people of Israel began to hunger for these things. They began to look back and failed to trust God for their present and future blessings.

This does not mean, of course, that we are not to be thankful for past blessings. If we had been one of those Israelites, it would have been proper to remember, years later, how gracious God had been. But it would have been entirely wrong to long for these things after God had begun to lead us into new paths and had set new and greater blessings before us.

Unfortunately there are many *leeks-and-garlic* Christians among us. You are one if you are constantly looking to the past. If your Christian testimony is entirely taken up with what God did for you thirty or forty years ago, or if you are constantly talking about the good old days when God's blessing on your life seemed great, then you are looking to the past. You can never do that and move forward.

Paul warns against it. He would say, "Look! Past blessings are fine. We have received them from God's hands, and we should be thankful for them. We rejoice in everything that he has done in our lives. But now we must let those things lie in the past and move forward." There can be no progress without this proper forgetting.

#### Reaching Forward

The second part of this is to begin to fix your gaze on the many things that God would yet be doing. He speaks of himself as "*forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead*" (Phil. 3:13).

Someone once asked David Livingstone when he was back in England briefly after having worked for many years in Africa, "Well, Dr. Livingstone, where are you ready to go

now?" Livingstone answered, "I am ready to go anywhere, provided it be forward."

That is what Paul would have said. Paul expected the Lord to continue to open doors, and when he did, Paul went through them instantly. Through those doors Paul was constantly striving toward those things that were ahead. (Remember, Paul was in prison when he wrote this.)

We can err in two ways in the running of the Christian life. We can err by looking only at the past; but we can also err by looking only at so distant a future that we miss the more immediate blessings that God has in store for this life.

When Paul says in verse 13 that he reaches "*forward to those things which are ahead*" he is not really talking about the distant future.

Paul is using the metaphor of running a race here. The "*goal*" ("mark," KJV; skopos) is the "goal marker" in English. It was the focus of the eye when a runner ran the race. It is not necessary the "goal line" but the next "focus point."

You see, the Christian life and getting closer to Christ is like a marathon race, not a sprint.

I have never run in a marathon, but we have people who have church. And I have learned from such people that to successfully run a marathon you don't just focus on the finish line. You set goals all along the way. "If I can just reach the 10 mile marker." "Now I want to get to the top of the hill at mile 15."

Just like that, we should run our race striving toward each new task before us. It is not sufficient to set our focus solely on the relationship we can have in Jesus someday in the future, or in heaven. That will never do, and it misses the point of the Christian life entirely. No, Paul is teaching us to "strain toward what is ahead" - ahead today and tomorrow and the next day.

- We should awake in the morning to say, "Lord, here is a new day that you have given me. I know that there are new things to be done and new lessons to be learned. Help me to use this day as well as I possibly can—to raise my children properly, to do well at my job, to love my neighbor."
- And when we go to bed that night we can pray, "Lord, I have not done anything today as well as I should have, and I missed many of your blessings. But thank you for being with me. Help

me now to place today's experiences behind and rest well so that I may serve you better tomorrow."

## CONCLUSION

Today is December 30, 2007 and a new year is about to begin. There is nothing more important that you can do to make 2008 most significant year of your life than to make "The Main Thing the Main Thing." In order to do that, it begins with "inner honesty".

In a moment I am going to ask the musicians to play, and I am going to invite you to come up front and dedicate yourself to considering *everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*,

- It takes "inner honesty" to admit to yourself and to God that somewhere along the line spiritual complacency has set in.
- It takes "inner honesty" to admit that the things of the world have become too bright and important, while Jesus in the things of God has become "strangely dim." (and that should not be, and you don't want it that way)
- It takes "inner honesty" admit that the "GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD" no longer captures your heart, moves and motivates you the way it once did -- and you can't seem to figure out why? Do you feel more like one of the nine lepers who didn't go back to thank Jesus for what had been done for him.

Dear brother and sister, I want to know Christ Jesus my Lord **personally, intimately, and in a continually growing way** this year. I have decided that I will do anything it takes to make that happen. I have decided to make that the Main Thing in my life. I will forget the past and focus on God today. I will wake up every morning and say "*Lord, here is a new day that you have given me. Let me experience your presence in everything I do. Help me live this day on every level with you in my mind and actions.*"

Will you join me? If you will, tell God that this morning. Make a new beginning today. Let's pray.