



**Sunday, September 25, 2022**

**Sunday Sermon:** Bob Stephens

**Scripture:** Philippians 3:1 - 4:1

**Sermon:** Stand Firm By Moving Forward

Good morning.

It has been said a couple of times already today about it being an honor and privilege to be up here and I feel exactly the same thing, to have the honor of sharing God's Word with you today. I just wanted to clarify one thing. Mike in the introduction to me, said I was a tutor at Trent. I'm actually a tutor at the Trent Valley Literacy Association. I don't want any of you with university students to be coming looking for help on university courses [congregation laughs]. So I want to make sure that we clarify that.

Philippians 3 is where we're going to be reading this morning. A friend of mine told me this story - and this is many years ago - his name is Craig. Craig one day was traveling along on the highway. I think it was the 401 but it could have been another four lane divided highway with limited access. As he was going along, he encountered what probably all of us have at some point and dreaded seeing... and that is nothing but brake lights for as far as the eye can see. Can you picture that? And so, coming to a stop and inching along in the traffic for quite a while and getting impatient with that. As they inched forward, Craig noticed an exit coming up. So he decided, "Well, why don't we see where that goes?" So he edged off when he got the chance and he went off on the exit with his plan being, "I'm going to see if I can find an alternate route, a parallel road that will take me there."

What he noticed as he got off, another car pulled off behind him and then another car, and then another car and soon he was leading a little bit of a parade. There were 12 cars behind him all heading down the road, thinking he was a local who knew where he was going. Well, he wasn't and he didn't. And that became very clear when all of this line of cars came to a dead end. Then Craig had to make a three point turn and drive past all of these people [congregation laughs] and you can only imagine the looks he received as he was heading back to resume on the highway.

The lesson for us is be careful who you choose to follow. In Craig's defense, he would say if he was confronted by some of those people, "Look, I didn't tell you to follow me."

Okay. Well in this section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, that's exactly what he wanted them to do, to follow his example. As I read the Scripture now, watch and listen for what specifically he's modeling for his brothers and sisters in Philippi and for us. **Philippians 3:1-21**

**1** Further, my brothers and sisters, 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 evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. **3** For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— **4** though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have 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 righteousness based on the law, faultless.

**7** But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. **8** What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, 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 on the basis of faith. **10** I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

**12** Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. **13** Brothers and sisters, 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.

**15** All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. **16** Only let us live up to what we have already attained. **17** Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. **18** For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

**20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

And now for prayer, just an old Anglican prayer as we turn to God's Word. God, what we do not know, teach us. What we do not have, give us. And what we are not, make us. For the sake of your Son and your glory. Amen.

So what is it that Paul is modeling for us here? What are the life lessons or the principles for us to follow? You know, conventional wisdom for preachers or public speakers is you should always have three points. Unfortunately, I found four here. But don't worry, that will not result in a message that's 25% longer. Four modeled principles from Paul's life. Just the keywords to plant in our memory for now. **Find, focus, forget and follow.**

The first principle - and this one is where we'll spend the longest amount of time because it's foundational to the rest - it comes out of a warning that Paul gives. The principle is, "find your identity in knowing Jesus." In verse one, he says in effect, "I don't mind repeating myself and reminding you of things I've told you before because it's a safeguard for you." Clearly, there's something on his mind that he thinks his dear friends need to be warned about. In fact, the very first word in verse two is, "watch out."

Some of the other translations of the Bible pick up something that the NIV leaves out here and that is the word, "Watch out." In the original language it is repeated three times. So for example, the ESV says, "Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for the mutilator of the flesh." Clearly a warning for us to heed. This was a group that had infiltrated the early church. We find them from the very earliest days in the book of Acts. Many of them came from the sect of the Pharisees.

Although they had come to intellectually, at least, acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews, they insisted that any Gentile wanting to be a part of the church had to be circumcised and follow all of the Jewish laws and rituals. For that reason, we often call them the Judaizers in a more universal sense, because they're still with us in every generation, and we can call them the legalists. Those who think it's about keeping laws and rules to be holy. This group was a constant thorn in Paul's side.

The letter to the Galatians in particular was written specifically to refute their teaching and their influence in the church. Here, his opinion of them is clear from the terms he uses to describe them. Not very flattering, is it? "Dogs, men who do evil, mutilators of the flesh." Calling them dogs, he's referring to their character. He's not referring to, you know, cute little domesticated purebreds. He's talking about those wild vicious beasts that roam the streets. In other words, they're a danger to all they come in contact with. "Men who do evil" is describing their conduct. It's a rather ironic term for him to use, given that these people consider themselves the holiest and the most righteous people around.

Paul says, in fact, what their lives are producing is evil, not just for themselves, but for all who are infected by their teaching. And "mutilators of the flesh" is clearly a sort of a sarcastic reference to their insistence on the rite of circumcision.

Then in verse three, he gives us four descriptions of genuine Christians, implying a contrast to the Judaizers with each one. He says, "It's we who are the circumcision." And he's including Gentile believers there, for as he wrote in **Romans 2:29** "... a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code." That's how God marks those that are His - by a work in our hearts.

And then he goes on, "It's we who worship by the Spirit, in contrast, to worship things through rituals and rites. It's we who glory in Christ Jesus as opposed to glorying in our own efforts and our own attempts to be righteous." He says, "We are the ones who put no confidence in the flesh." That was exactly what these opponents were doing, believing that they could satisfy God's requirements by their own strength, their own willpower.

And then in **Philippians 3:4**, Paul gets personal. "If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more." He's essentially replying to these legalists saying, "I've been where you are. My personal credentials stack up against anyone."

Then he lists those in **Philippians 3:5-6** all of the ways in which he could have confidence in the flesh, and at one time did have confidence in all of these achievements and all of these characteristics. This was his identity. It's how he saw himself. It's where his confidence laid. On an accounting ledger, these were all the items on the credit side of his righteousness score. The right nationality, the right upbringing, the right education, the right career choice, right, right, right.

But he says in **Philippians 3:7**, "Everything that was a gain for me, I now consider loss." I like how this is worded in the earlier version of the NIV. "Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss." A clear image of an accounting spreadsheet.

What happened? What happened to his former sense of identity that seems so established, so firm, so solid, so impressive? What became of all of those achievements? What changed? Well, he encountered Jesus on the way to Damascus to arrest the followers of this man. He stopped in his tracks literally. He comes face to face with the risen Lord, and everything changes. And now he says, "Everything that was over here on the credit side of the ledger has all been moved to the debit column. Everything I thought I had going for me, everything I thought made me who I was and everything that I thought God wanted me to be, I came to see it as a loss."

In fact, he goes on to say, "I consider everything a loss, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ and be found in Him." And this wasn't hyperbole for Paul. He truly did lose everything from his former life when he came to put his faith in Christ and become a witness for Him.

Do his words here remind you of a parable of Jesus? They do for me. About a man who was walking through a field and stumbled upon a treasure. It doesn't tell us how he found it or what caused him to dig in that place, but he dug up a treasure.

When he found it and when he saw the treasure, it says, "He went away. He firstly buried it up again to keep it safe. And then he went away and sold everything he owned in order to buy the land, to possess the treasure. He did it without any hesitation. He didn't sit down and weigh the pros and cons of his idea and he didn't experience any buyer's remorse after he had bought it.

Jesus says, "With joy, he sold everything he had to buy that field." And Jesus said, "That's what the kingdom of heaven is like." Finding a treasure and paying whatever it costs to possess it. Is knowing Jesus such a treasure for us? Paul says, "It's the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus." Not simply believing some facts about Him in our head. Notice two things about how he describes him. "Christ Jesus, my Lord. That phrase, "Jesus Christ, Lord," or "Lord Jesus Christ" is a common phrase Paul uses often to refer to the Lord. Sometimes it's just "Christ Jesus the Lord" and about six times in the epistles, its "Christ Jesus, our Lord" as He talks about our common faith, but here and only here in all of his writings, does he call Him, "Christ Jesus, my Lord."

It's personal. It's intimate. At the same time, it's about acknowledging, "He is the Lord, not me. I must know Him on His terms, not mine." So this is now where Paul finds his identity. Having abandoned his former identity, he finds it in a relationship to Christ in the righteousness he received as a gift from God because of what Christ has done, simply received by faith. Is that where you find your identity today? What about me? Do I consider any other accomplishments in my life or any righteous act that I've done to be worth anything more than garbage, in contrast to knowing and being in Christ? Have I come to truly believe the words of the hymn writer who wrote, "Nothing in my hands I bring. Simply to thy cross I claim."

So first of all, I come to find his identity fully, completely in knowing Jesus Christ. This defined now who he was and how he saw himself and then secondly, flowing from that identity for the rest of his life. He continued to focus his energy on knowing, following and becoming like Jesus. He states his intention in **Phillipians 3:10-11**, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Well, what do we choose these phrases tell us about Paul's focus? The power of his resurrection. That brings to mind what Paul has written about elsewhere. It's not just talking about the fact that he wants to be raised from the dead at some point in the future after he dies, but he's talking about the resurrection from the dead, the power we can experience in our lives here and now.

He says in **Romans 6:4**, "... just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Then in Romans 6:11, he says, "... count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul wanted to continue to experience the reality of the power that comes from his union with Christ to live a new life. Able to serve God from a transformed heart free from the power of sin, and participation in his suffering. There's that word Koinonia again that Pastor John has been drawing our attention to.

Fellowship, participation. Why would that be an ambition, to want to suffer with Christ? Well, I think that there are a few reasons that Paul might have had in his mind. First of all, suffering with someone else always increases a connection, always increases intimacy. Two people may be going through the same health crisis together, going to treatments together and there's a bonding that takes place as they walk that difficult journey together. Then fighting side by side in a war or facing fears or challenges of any kind. So suffering and experienced persecution for the sake of Christ is going to bring Paul a deeper intimacy with Him.

I heard recently of Corrie Ten Boom who said that the worst that the conditions became in the concentration camp where she was, the more precious Jesus became to her there. Suffering also incurs a special blessing.

Paul had told the **Philippians in 1:29**, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." Jesus had said, Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness." Matthew 5:12, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven..." And finally, when we suffer and persevere for Christ, it inspires others.

Paul had written **Philippians 1:14**, "... because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." So, for all these reasons, his ambition was to suffer for and with Jesus. Then he sums up his desire, "Becoming like him in his death." Paul saw the ultimate expression of his desire to become more and more like Jesus as the opportunity, the honor of giving his life for Him, if that was God's plan for his life. And of course, that is what happened.

Then in **Philippians 3:12**, Paul changes directions. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." For what reason had Christ taken hold of Paul? You might say, "Oh, because he needed him to be a servant. He needed him to preach. He needed him to give us so much of the Scriptures. He needed us to explain the gospel." What's the reason that God has taken hold of any of us? Is it not that we might be conformed to the image of His Son? Is that not God's purpose for us?

And Paul says to these people, "You need to know that I know that I'm not there yet. I haven't arrived." For all the ways that Paul had changed from Saul of Tarsus, for all that he'd experienced of Christ's resurrection power, or all that he'd endured for the cause of the gospel, he wasn't done. And key to his attitude is what he says next in Philippians 3:13-14, "Brothers and sisters, 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."

The third of the four words. What was the third word? Forget - good, you didn't forget. [Congregation laughs.] Forgetting what is behind. The third principle is, "We need to choose what to forget that could either slow us down or divert our progress in growing in grace and in our likeness to Jesus. All of this language, "press on, to take hold, straining toward what is

ahead, pressing on to the goal, winning the prize." All of this is language from the world of athletic competition, isn't it? And one of the keys to success in sports is to be able to forget. To forget yesterday's game, to forget last year's successes or failures, so that you are neither discouraged by past failures or become complacent by past successes.

The Georgia Bulldogs won the NCAA college football championship last year, after many years of having to watch their arch rival, the Alabama Crimson Tide win it. The Bulldogs finally won the championship. When they showed up for training camp this spring to get ready for this season, they were all given t-shirts. And on a t-shirt, it said, "No one cares." [Congregation laughs] No one cares. In other words, what you achieved last season doesn't matter to anyone right now. So it shouldn't matter to you. It's all about getting ready for the next game. The next challenge.

As I was preparing for today, I got thinking about how remarkable it is that at this point in Paul's life, he could still have this attitude. We're gonna have a map up on the screen here.



The back of your Bible, you may well have one of these maps or something similar showing all Paul's missionary journeys. I mean, without air travel, without cars, without trains. I mean, all of the places he went. All of the cities that he visited and took the gospel to, and all of the traveling that he did in his ministry. We get a good visual of all the ground that he covered, all the different regions he pioneered the gospel in. From that first encounter on the Damascus road when Jesus called him to be his witness, he had not stopped. He just kept traveling to new places where Christ had not been preached, and then circling back around. That's why we see all those circles.

He kept circling back around, revisiting churches that he'd started to encourage and strengthen them. What a legacy. And yet, now he's in a prison cell. Or at least he's under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard. His traveling days are over. How easy it would have been for him to either be discouraged by that fact. To say, "Oh, there's so much more that I wanted to do but now I can't. I'm under this constraint." What was his identity now?

See, if your identity is found in what you do or your identity is found in your job or anything else in your life, that's going to pass. If your identity is not found in Christ, he could have been discouraged. Or he might have become complacent and said, "Well, you know, I've had a good run. I've accomplished a lot in my life. I'd like to see anybody else that has anywhere near the accomplishments I have. Given my current limitations, I think it's someone else's turn to step up to the plate." But rather than dwelling on his accomplishments, he's looking ahead. He's pressing on to the goal. He's still pursuing the prize. He's still finding through his writing letters and sending out delegations, a way to minister. He's just doing it in a different way. And he says in Philippians 3:16, "This is a true sign of maturity." It's not thinking that you've been on the road so long that you must have arrived by now. It's not reminiscing about all you used to do in your service for God. True maturity is demonstrated by looking for changes that God still desires to make in our character and opportunities He still has for us to do in His service.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Satisfaction with results will be the [death] knell of progress. No man is good who thinks that he cannot be better. He has no holiness who thinks that he is holy enough." This man Paul, who had learned to be content with whatever material things he had, never could be content with his spiritual attainments. We would do well to learn the principle of choosing well what we need to put in the rearview mirror and move forward.

Quickly, the fourth principle coming out of Paul's example, choose well who you want to follow. "Join with others," he says, "in following my example. Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." Unlike my friend Craig, Paul could encourage people to follow him because he knew where he was going. More importantly, he knew his life was focused on following Jesus as closely and intimately as he could.

But beyond his own example, Paul encourages the believers to be both careful and intentional about finding others to use as models because he goes on to describe those who aren't good models, those even who could be in the church whose lives are really focused on themselves and their own appetites and earthly things.

So, the Word to us today - look for those who by their humility mixed with confidence, have clearly found their identity in Christ and His grace alone. Look for those who, despite the length of time they've been on the journey, still have a hunger to know Christ in a deeper and deeper way. Look for those who live as citizens of heaven, eagerly awaiting their Savior but continuing to find ways to be fruitful in his service while they wait. And then of course, we can turn around and ask ourselves, "Am I the kind of model that would lead someone well?"

Let me finish with the lyrics from a Steve Green song from 1991. "We're pilgrims on the journey  
Of the narrow road, And those who've gone before us Line the way. Cheering on the faithful,  
Encouraging the weary, Their lives a stirring testament To God's sustaining grace. O may all  
who come behind us Find us faithful, May the fire of our devotion Light their way. May the  
footprints that we leave, Lead them to believe, And the lives we live Inspire them to obey. O may  
all who come behind us Find us faithful."

Let's pray

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. It challenges us, it convicts us, but it gives us a clear picture. Not just of a man who was faithful to his calling, who found his identity in the place he should, but to the Christ who so transformed his life to the treasure we can know and experience that will change us. Thank you for the models and the faithful people who've inspired us along the way, Lord. It's our prayer that we would be faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*

