

Straining Forward

April 3, 2022

Pastor John Mars

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church. Hear the Word of the Lord. This passage comes from Philippians, chapter 3, beginning with verse 4, Paul writing to the church at Philippi.

If anyone thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. And 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 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 come from God and is by faith. 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, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

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 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. May God bless the reading of His Word.

I am an introvert. Now, that means a lot of things. It means I am very comfortable by myself. It also means that crowds drain me. I can deal with them, but I go home on Sundays and crash. It means that I live most of my life in my own head. It means that I may have thought about something for two hours, and I give it to you in two sentences. I condense it. You see, extroverts think out loud, and some of them talk and then think... maybe. I have lost many an argument with myself. I have conversations with myself about upcoming meetings. I have found myself being absolutely ticked off at somebody before they even get to my office. I have to watch that, because I go over things in my head. You know? And I have arguments with myself and with God. And sometimes they are vocalized, so much so that from time to time my wife will yell upstairs, "Are you talking to me or to yourself?"

The Apostle Paul wrote many letters. And in those letters, he addressed issues that he had found out about through other people's writings or through conversations and he addresses those issues. In addition to that, he also addresses imaginary objections or anticipated objections. And that's what we have in our passage today. Paul had been talking to them, the church at Philippi, about what was called the Judaizers, people who believed that Jesus was Messiah, but they believed that it was Jesus plus the law. And Paul said, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no! It's not Jesus plus, it's Jesus, period." In our passage, he anticipates that his opponents, the people that he's arguing against, might say, "Well, you don't know what it's like to be a real Jew. You don't know what it's like to be a real Israelite." And Paul's response is, "Oh, really? I was born to a Jewish family, circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin; as to

legalistic righteousness, a Pharisee (the strictest sect of all Judaism, dedicated to the minutiae of the law). As for zeal, I persecuted the Church to the point of having Christians put to death. As to legalistic righteousness according to the law, faultless. If anybody has reason to put confidence in this stuff, the flesh, I have more. But all of that," he said, "I consider nothing, nothing but loss, useless, pointless and fruitless. As compared to knowing Jesus Christ, I consider that garbage." The translators of the Scripture have done us a favor in trying to sanitize what Paul actually said. In most translations, it is translated either rubbish or filthy rags. But what Paul actually said was, "I consider all that legalistic stuff that I used to be, to be the nasty rags wrapped around oozing wounds or the rags used to clean up human excrement." To put it into modern language, we might say he considers it to be dirty diapers compared to the riches of knowing Jesus Christ his Lord. His conclusion was, "I want to know Christ." And the word that he uses in Greek for "to know," is to have the most intimate knowledge. "I want to know every single, solitary aspect of Jesus, and I want every part of my life to conform to His life. I don't want people to see me anymore. All I want them to see is Jesus, when they look at me. That's what I want. I want to become like him in life. I want to become like him in death. I want to become like him in the resurrection. But I'm not there yet."

Can you relate? "I'm not there yet." Now, here is this great apostle, perhaps the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. When he writes the letter to the church at Philippi, he is convinced that he is in the last days, months, or years of his life. He believes that his life will soon end. He is at the end of his journey and he says, "I'm not there yet. I've got a ways to go. So, what I am going to do, I am going to forget what is behind me and I'm going to press on toward the goal for which Christ has called me." There are several things to note in that statement. Paul was absolutely flabbergasted that God had chosen him, that God loved even him; given who he was, given what he had done, given that he had persecuted the church, given that he was responsible for the death of Christians. He was flabbergasted, amazed and humbled that God chose him, even him, and had taken hold of him for His purpose, that he was vital to the kingdom of God. And he said, "What I'm going to do is, I'm going to forget all that garbage that is behind me and I am going to press forward to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of me. And that is to conform every part of my being to the likeness of Jesus Christ. I'm not there yet," Paul says, "but I'm going to press on to take hold of it." And again, the imagery that Paul uses, the word that he uses, is of a runner who is running toward the finish line, giving every ounce of energy they have to the point that when they cross the finish line, they collapse in total exhaustion. He says, "I'm going to give it all I've got. I may not have much left, but I'm going to give it what I've got."

It that was the attitude of the great evangelist, the great apostle Paul, that should also be our attitude. It should also be our goal. It should also be what consumes our lives. What did Paul say? He said, "I'm putting the past behind me. Forget about it: the good the bad and the ugly." As individuals and as churches, we have the propensity to look back at the past, the good things that happened in the past, and hold on to them tenaciously. We glory in them and we go, "Remember when, remember when, remember when..." And we must learn from the past. If we don't learn from the past, we're destined to repeat the failures of the past. We must learn from the past, but turn it loose. If you hold on to the past, you try to replicate the past. And, brothers and sisters, Christ has never done anything twice the same way. Everything is new. Everything is different. God has never done the same thing the same way twice. Every fingerprint is different. Every flake of snow is different. Let it go. And as individuals and as churches,

we have the tendency not to learn from our mistakes. We forget about them. We try not to remember them, but we can't afford to do that. We must learn from the bad and the ugly. We must acknowledge those places where we need to improve. We must learn from them and let them go. If we don't let them go, it's like running a race dragging an anchor!

When I was in high school, a long time ago in a land far, far, far away, when I played football, they call me Anchorman. Two reasons. Number one, I played offensive and defensive strong-side tackle during certain situations. If they needed the end of the line held, I could hold it. If I got my feet planted, if I got my feet under me, you were not moving me and I was moving you. But also, I ran like I had an anchor tied to me. I was at absolute full speed in ten feet. That was it. They timed my 100-yard dash with an Egyptian sundial. Okay? Anchorman. I would never, ever be confused with an athlete. If we don't learn from the past, the good, the bad and the ugly, and turn it loose, it's like running the race with an anchor tied behind us.

We have not arrived yet. I believe that our best days as a church and as individuals are ahead of us. I believe! You say, "Well, wait a minute, Preacher. You know how old I am?" I don't mean going back to age 25. I mean your relationship with Christ. You can mature and become more and more and more like Him at every age. And I believe that in our future at Central United Protestant Church, better days are ahead. But we must press on toward our calling in Christ Jesus. It's hard to believe, but I have been here for seven months now. And for seven months I have gotten the same message from God: "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait." Well, we are through waiting. Amen? It's time to start walking. We are through waiting. I hate to use this illustration, so forgive me, but I can't think of another one. We are through waiting, but we have been waiting for over two years. I am very, very, very proud of what this congregation has been able to accomplish during the pandemic. I am very grateful for what volunteers have done and what our church staff has done, but nevertheless we have been handicapped. We have been waiting. Here's my illustration. Unfortunately, many of you have in the past been debilitated. For whatever reason, you have been flat on your back for some time. If that has occurred in your life, you know that when you start to come out of that, you don't get up and run a marathon. You have to rehab. Sometimes even walking or standing can be labored and you have to learn how to do that again. We're beginning to open up now. The choir's back. We're serving coffee out front. We have fellowship time after service. We're beginning to invite some outside groups back in. But we're in rehab, so I need some things from you. Number one, I need you to be patient. There's a lot of things that we haven't done over two years. We've got to figure that out again. I need you to be kind. Jesus said so. We have had a massive turnover in staff since last we were completely open. Be kind. Be ready to do your part when you're asked.

And I need you to be here. Now, let me qualify that. If you can be here physically, you need to be here. But if because of COVID, because of concerns, if because of health, if because of travel, join us online. Now, I've been in this business a long time, but one of the things I know that I know that I know: people can be very creative in their excuses for not attending church. Extremely! But did you know you have virtually no excuse not to attend either in person or online now? You can, as you're driving to Walla Walla or White Pass, or wherever it is you're traveling to, you can watch us and listen to us online. You can be here in person on Sunday morning. You can watch us at home on Sunday morning. You can watch the service at 2 am on Thursday morning if you'd like to. You've got no excuse. In fact, if you can find an excuse, you've got to really be

creative. But not only do you need to be here, I'm going to challenge you to invite somebody, to bring somebody. I don't know why the football illustrations are coming out today at the end of college basketball season. I don't know, I don't understand it. But when I played football, when we were about to take the field, our offensive line coach would say the same thing every week. He would say, "Every man get a man, and every good man get two." So, not only bring yourself, but invite somebody else. Bring somebody else, encourage somebody else, and that's not just you people who are joining us in person. That is those people that are joining us online. Send the link to somebody else and have them join us. If you don't know how to do it, ask your grandchildren. They do.

No excuses. Do what you can and don't worry about what you can't. Now, y'all hear me. Before the pandemic hit, there were some things that some of you were able to do that you can't do now. God knows that. If you can't do it, don't worry about it. Give it to God and move on and do what you can. Do remember, last but not least, that things are going to be different. They can't help but be different. Not only have two years passed, but Pastor Aaron and Pastor John don't even know what you used to do. Okay? It's going to be different. Trust me. Just say, "Okay, they're newbies. It's alright." And also, know this: If you want to find fault, Satan will help you. But if you want to find what is right, God will help you to find what is right. I had a bad joke come across my desk this past week about this old codger who was just absolutely, positively, unequivocally negative about everything. Y'all ever know somebody like that? Don't point at anybody! His wife was absolutely a sweetheart. She was bound and determined to make him happy. One day she said, "Honey, what do you want for breakfast?" He said, "Well, I don't want much. I just want two eggs and toast. I want one egg scrambled and one fried." She said, "Alright." She went in the kitchen and came back a little bit later. She had toast and a fried egg and a scrambled egg. He looked at the plate and said, "I knew it! You scrambled the wrong egg!" If you want to find fault, Satan will help you. If you want to find what is right, God will help you. It is our job to press on. God has called us, equipped us, enabled us to reach this community for Jesus Christ and it's time to press on. Let's pray.

Lord, our desire is to take hold of that for which You have taken hold of us. And as we move into a bold new future, we give You that future. We ask that Your Spirit would be strong among us, that we might hear clearly and follow faithfully. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.