

## **FBC Service Sunday December 31 2023 Philippians 3:7-14 Facing the New Year**

**Intro:** In the earlier verses of Philippians 3, Paul outlines a magnificent vision of knowing Christ. He made knowing Christ the most important thing in his life because nothing compares with knowing him. And it's possible some of us may have thought Paul had really made it in the Christian life.

As if to clear up any misunderstanding, Paul clarifies that he has not yet made it.

He calls for the pursuit of a prize that can only be fully realized in heaven. And by the way, in this passage he confesses that he hadn't reached it, he hadn't attained it, he hadn't acquired it, he hadn't arrived at perfection, and this is thirty years after his conversion.

And if the singularly unique Apostle Paul, perhaps the most committed dedicated Christian who ever lived, after 30 years had not achieved perfection, who in the world are any of us to claim such.

**He deals a devastating blow to the doctrine of perfectionism.**

But rather than discouraging him in his Christian life, it instead motivates him all the more to press on. Whenever you're feeling discouraged or sluggish in your Christian walk, these are some great encouraging verses to read.

There's an old story about a happy little boy who went out into a field wearing a baseball cap. In one hand he carried a baseball, and in the other a baseball bat. His look of confidence indicated he couldn't wait to swing his bat.

Cocking his bat, he tossed the ball into the air, saying, **"I'm the greatest batter in the world!"** Then he swung and missed. **"Strike one,"** he said.

He picked up the ball, carefully looked it over, then threw it into the air again. As he swung, he repeated, **"I'm the greatest batter in the world."** Once again he missed. **"Strike two,"** he said.

Maybe there's a hole in my bat, he said to himself, as he looked over his bat to make sure there wasn't a hole in it. Then he picked up the ball, adjusted his cap, and tossed the ball into the air for the 3rd time.

He repeated again, **"I'm the greatest batter in the world,"** and swung with all his might - and missed for the 3rd straight time. "Wow" he cried, **"What a pitcher. I'm the greatest pitcher in the world!"**

**Today is the 5th Sunday of December 2023. How do you see yourself? A pitcher or a batter. One thing is for sure, at times we've all struck out.**

**What do you anticipate the new year will hold for you?**

Like the little boy with the bat, may I suggest that your frame of mind, your reaction to its events, will largely determine whether it's a year of victory or a year of defeat.

The Apostle Paul was never one to let circumstances conquer him. Rather, with the help of God, he was determined to win the victor's crown. **Take a listen as his attitude, dedication, and determination shine through in our text from Philippians 3:12-14.**

*“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*

*No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.”*

With Paul’s words fresh in our minds, let’s look at the teaching from this text.

What great words to look at as another New Year beckons.

**First of all, it shows us the value of time.**

**E.G. How do we value ONE YEAR?** Ask a student who failed a grade.

**How do we value ONE MONTH?** Ask a mother whose baby arrived prematurely.

**How do we value ONE WEEK?** Ask a politician when the spotlight suddenly falls on their actions.

**How do we value ONE HOUR?** Ask someone who lies terminally ill waiting for a loved one who is late in arriving.

**How do we value ONE MINUTE?** Ask someone who missed a plane, a train, a very important engagement that would never be rescheduled.

**How do we value ONE SECOND?** Ask an Olympic Medalist, someone who just missed having an accident, **or someone saying “goodbye” to a precious loved one they will never see again.**

**Of course we know that time is a human invention.** I’m convinced that God doesn’t wear a wristwatch or use a calendar. The Bible says, **“With God a day is as 1,000 years, and 1,000 years as a day.”** God deals with eternity, **and therefore time is not an important factor with Him.**

**But time is important to us because we live in a limited time frame.** We begin with infancy, then go on to adolescence, adulthood, middle-age, old age, and to everything that follows. **We measure life in segments of time.**

**Now, what is it that makes something valuable?** Usually it’s scarcity. If there’s a scarcity, then that product quickly escalates in value.

**If something is rare, it’s usually valuable.** But if we have a lot of it, it loses its value, the same is true with time.

**Maybe that helps explain the generation gap.** Young people feel that they have plenty of time, therefore time loses its value, and they aren’t too concerned about wasting or squandering it.

On the other hand, as we get up in years a bit, we begin to realize that our time is becoming rare and therefore more valuable.

So those of us over 60 tend to look at those under 20 and say, **“Hey, don’t squander time kids, because it’s very valuable.”**

They reply, **"No, it's not. We have lots of time. We can waste it any way we want."**

**And the wider the age gap, the wider the generation gap** - because of the different values that we place on time.

**The Bible often speaks of the brevity of life.** It compares life to **the weaver's shuttle** rapidly going back and forth - to **the shadows of summer** that quickly disappear - **to grass which grows up, dies, and then is burned.**

**So treasure every moment that you have! Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift...That's why it's called the "present."**

E.G. Statisticians tells us that the average life span is increasing, **but if you're under 30 then you think you have 50 or 60 years ahead of you.** But many retired folks will tell you that's not really very long at all.

I remember as a kid laughing when my mother told me one day I would realize how fast time flies. **Oh how right she was!**

**The Bible clearly teaches us that life is uncertain.**

Time is like a valuable commodity in a very precious and delicate vessel. It might break at any moment and we might lose it all. **So we have this moment!**

**We don't know anything about the future, but we have this moment, and that's all that we really have.**

Because of the uncertainty of life, the Bible says, **"Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation."** Because life is uncertain, we must take advantage of the time that we have. **If you have not yet trusted Jesus as your Saviour, let today be the day.**

**We are very special beings in that God has given us the ability to remember.** Your memory may be your friend or your enemy. When you remember, hopefully you'll remember some very pleasant things about this past year, but chances are that you'll also remember some not so pleasant things.

**In fact, sometimes we dwell upon the negative and begin to feel sorry for ourselves.** Maybe this past year was a time of great transitions in your life – **perhaps the kids moved away from home.**

Perhaps **your finances didn't turn out as expected. Perhaps someone you love dearly hurt you deeply.** Maybe it was a time when **personal obstacles almost overcame you.**

You see, those things can cripple us and hold us in bondage to the past. **That is why Paul said, "I forget about what lies behind."** Paul had a lot that was behind him. Do you remember his very shaky past?

**He persecuted the church.** He used his authority to have Christians imprisoned and killed. **By his own admission he said, "I am the chief of sinners."**

If he had walked around all his life with this tremendous burden of guilt crippling him, he would never have become the great apostle we know and love today.

**But what did he say? "...forgetting what is behind..."** In other words, **"Lord, I commit it to you. I seek your forgiveness for all the sins of the past,** and I look forward to what lies ahead. And right now, I'm going to live today the best I can for You."

I believe that's good advice for us as well. **Christianity is strewn with too many believers who can never forgive themselves for past sins.**

Do you ever look back in such a way that keeps you from moving forward in your Christian life?

Some people look back at their past successes, all their achievements and accomplishments. Instead of serving God in the present, they take comfort in how they have served him in the past.

**Now what does Paul mean by the past?** He means the past...forgetting those things that are behind. **What things?** Everything.

Good things and bad things, achievements, virtuous deeds, great accomplishments, spiritual victories, as well as bad things...sins, iniquities, failures, disasters. **All of it.**

**You say Alex, "You mean forget it all" Yes I do.** Why? Because it has nothing to do with what you're doing right now. You cannot live on past victories. You cannot celebrate your value by your past.

**You should never be debilitated by your past sins, iniquities and burdens of guilt.** And yet so many people are so distracted by the past that they never get around to running in the future.

The clearest vision is given to the one who forgets the past.

Warren Wiersbe tells us: **Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?"**

You don't move ahead by constantly looking in the rear view mirror. **The past is a rudder to guide you, not an anchor to drag you down.** **We must learn from the past but not live in the past.**

You hear people in the church say, "Well, it's just not like it used to be. I remember the good old days and we were all involved doing this, and we were all involved doing that. And it was all so great."

**But what does that mean for today? Folks it's absolutely irrelevant.** It means absolutely nothing to the moment except it can paralyze you.

A runner doesn't go to the blocks in a sprint and sit there, and when getting ready for the race say to the guys around him, "I just want you to know I've won a pile of races in the past. **Boys, I've run really fast in the past.** I remember I was so blazing fast I left the rest of the field far behind."

Who cares, my church family? This is another race. Forget that stuff.

**I'll tell you right now, few people are interested in what we did as individuals in the past. Nobody's interested in what I did in the past.** What our God is interested in is what are we are going to do now and where we're going in the future?

Our Lord must weep when he sees churches full of people who are holding all kinds of grudges, bitterness, and junk from the past and they're paralyzed by it. Also, the memories of what you were in your former unconverted state shouldn't paralyze you and it shouldn't discourage you.

If God has used you in the past, that's great. But realize that He still has work for you to do today. **Don't ever settle for being an also ran**, only people whom God wants to use now in the present. Put your hand to the plow, don't look back, pursue the prize.

Other people have the opposite problem. **Instead of looking at their past successes, they focus on their failures.** They have failed God in the past, so they feel that God cannot use them in the present. If that is you, let me encourage you this morning.

**First of all, if you're in Christ know that God has forgiven you.** You may not have forgiven yourself, but God has forgiven you.

**And secondly**, know that God still has work for you. He's the God of second chances, the God of third, fourth and fifth chances, and He will never give up on you. In my own life, He has used my past failures to help me minister in the present.

**If we keep looking backwards, we will never go forwards.** As Christians we need to forget what is behind, and then strain towards what is ahead.

**And then thirdly**, you need to press on toward the goal to win the prize. Look at verse 14: *"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 3:14)

**This verse is all about perseverance and purposeful living.** What good is it if you run a great race and then drop out before the finish line? You need to persevere. And how do you do that? You need to have purpose. You need to keep your eyes on the goal. God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Don't live your life for earthly things. You have a higher calling. Don't give in to complacency.

**Keep your eyes on the goal; focus on the finish line; remember what the race is all about. Keep your eyes on the prize.** What happens in a race as you get closer to the finish line? You don't slow down, you speed up, because the end is in sight, and the prize is before you.

Get rid of all distractions. Forget what is behind, and strain towards what is ahead. Press on toward the goal to win the prize, until you hear *"well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord."*

**Finally**, Paul says, **"This one thing I do."** Now Paul obviously did more than one thing. He made tents. He preached sermons and established churches. He healed the sick. He wrote books. He did a lot of different things.

**But he said, "The top priority in my life is to press on toward the goal for the prize for which God has called me."**

It was Jesus who said, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will be added unto you."*

**Every morning when you open your eyes, tell yourself that the day is special.** Every day, every minute, every breath truly is a gift from God. **Life is a precious gift from God,** and He wants us to get the most out of it – for **"Tempus Fugit!" – Time Flies!**

**Imagine there's a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400.** It carries over no balance from day to day. Every evening it deletes whatever part of the balance you failed to use during the day. **What would you do? Draw out every cent, of course!**

**Each of us has such a bank. Its name is TIME.** Every morning, it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night it writes off as lost whatever of this you have not invested to good purpose. **It carries over no balance. It allows no overdraft.**

**Each day it opens a new account for you. Each night it burns the remains of the day.** If you fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is yours. **There is no going back. There is no drawing against "tomorrow."** **Live in the present on today's deposits.**

Invest it so as to get from it the utmost in health, happiness, and success! **The clock is running. Make the most of today.**

**We wake up each morning with 24 hours of raw unmanufactured time.** What are we going to do with it? Will we heed Paul's call to forget things behind us, or press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

**What a powerful lesson for us to learn and apply to our lives this New Year's Eve.** It doesn't matter how many times you get knocked down, **get back up and set your eyes upon Jesus,** not only the author of your faith but also the finisher of your faith!

**As I close this morning let me leave you with this story.**

A lot of people have died climbing the Alps, falling off of precipices. At the foot of one of the many mountains that has been attempted a number of times, is a little grave. It's the grave of a man who tried to climb to the pinnacle and fell off a precipice to his death.

The tombstone there is very simple. It gives his name and then it says, **"He died climbing."** That really should be the epitaph of the tomb of every Christian, **"He died climbing."**

A long time ago, another man using similar words taught the same principle.

It was Paul who said, *"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us"* (Phil 3:13, 14). **Let's pray together.**

**Father,** as we approach the end of this year, we thank you for all the blessings you have bestowed upon us. We pray that you will continue to guide us in the coming year and help us to grow in faith, hope, and love. We ask that you bless our families, friends, and loved ones, and keep them safe and healthy. We pray for those who are struggling, that they may find comfort and peace in your love. As we celebrate the new year, we ask that you help us to remember the lessons of the past and look forward to the opportunities of the future, and may we always seek to do your will. We ask this in Jesus' name, **Amen.**