

The Life of Christian Excellence
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Let us go to the Lord in prayer.

It is good to be with you. Again, I bring you the greetings from Cornerstone Bible Church in Miami, Florida. We love you and we often pray for you. And may the Lord help us today to draw near to him. He said, "If you draw near to me, I will draw near to you."

Let us pray.

Our Father, we come before you this morning, this Lord's Day morning with gratitude and Thanksgiving and love in our hearts. We love you, our Father, because you first loved us. Give us your Spirit, oh God. You know how to give good gifts to your children so we ask that you give us your Holy Spirit. Help us to worship you. Help us to draw near to you we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.

Please be seated.

May I ask you to take your Bibles and turn with me to Philippians chapter three?

When I was in high school my favorite subject was physical education, PE. I liked the sports. I like to have fun. The subject that I had the most difficulty with was English. And in God's providence he gave me a wonderful English teacher whose name was Mr. McGran. I never forget Mr. McGran. Mr. McGran had a real, unusual way of provoking his students to work hard and to learn and he focused often times on his laziest students.

So one day after high school English class Mr. McGran spoke to me and as he usually labeled me he called me... he called everybody Mr. and Miss. And he said, "Mr. Fullback..." I was on the football team and that is what he called me to get me to provoke me.

He said, "Mr. Fullback, I want to see you after class. You remain in your seat."

And so I remained in my seat and everyone left and the door was closed. Mr. McGran came over to me. And then he changed his tone a little bit and he said, “Mr. Wheeler, how come you are working so hard for mediocrity?”

And a big question mark gets in my mind. I know he is not talking about English. I know he is not talking about me working hard in English. What is this word “mediocrity”? I had never heard of it. I was a junior in high school and never heard of that word “mediocrity.” What could it mean?

But I knew it meant something and it was aimed at me and it wasn’t until later on some years later that word stuck with me. And some years later I discovered that mediocrity meant to be average. Mediocrity means to barely get by. It means to do just enough to be ordinary, to perform without distinction.

He knew me.

That word expressed what I was all about in English class. In fact, I remember how happy I was when I didn’t get a D and I got a C in English class. I was happy.

Now let me ask you a question.

Why kind of a person are you? Even more important, if you are a Christian, what kind of a Christian are you? Think about it. What kind of a Christian are you? Do you have anything like a real passion for God? Or are you doing just enough to get by? Is the kind of Christianity you have just enough Christianity to get by? Do you put forth any effort to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Are you regularly exercising yourself under godliness? Or are you just doing what you think it takes to get you to heaven?

It seems like for some people they have no greater ambition in the Christian life than to be a lukewarm Christian.

Our Lord Jesus, I remind you, said in Revelation three verses 15 and 16, “I know your works.”¹

It is very sobering to read those passages where the Lord Jesus, through the apostle John, writes seven letters to seven churches and every single one of those churches he begins by saying, “I know your works.”²

He is writing to churches corporately. He knows the works of this church of Immanuel Baptist Church. He knows your works. And as individual believers, those of you who are Christians, he knows your works.

He says:

¹ Revelation 3:15.

² Ibid.

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.³

Spiritually lazy and undisciplined, Christianity is not only unbiblical, it is shameful and dishonoring. It is contradictory to the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Jesus gave himself for us that he might redeem us from every lawless deed, that he might purify for himself his own special people and these special people are characterized as being zealous for good works.

A mediocre Christian is a person who professes to be a Christian, but is not really interested in good works. They are not really interested in pleasing God. A mediocre Christian never seems to grow in grace, never seems to make any real progress in the Christian life. A mediocre Christian only prays and reads the Bible and comes to church because they have to, not because they are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Just because it is a custom.

Do you know there are Muslims that have a custom to go to the mosque and pray five times a day? Some Muslims have better customs than some of us who profess to be Christians.

A mediocre Christian may, might have enough Christianity to get them into Immanuel Baptist Church or Cornerstone Bible Church, but they don't have enough Christianity to get them to heaven.

This morning what I would like for us to do, all of us, is to look at ourselves from a biblical perspective and in so doing I hope to stir you up. I hope to stir myself up to pursue what I am calling a life of Christian excellence.

What is the opposite of mediocrity? Excellence.

And I want to read Philippians chapter three verses one through 14.

“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.”⁴

Here is a man writing from prison. Talk about circumstances.

“Rejoice in the Lord.”⁵

You know, we can't always rejoice in our circumstances. We can't always rejoice in our children. We can't always rejoice in our husbands or our wives or our church. We can't

³ Revelation 3:15-16.

⁴ Philippians 3:1.

⁵ Ibid.

always rejoice in our circumstances at work. But we can always rejoice in the Lord and we ought to be rejoicing in the Lord.

“For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.”⁶

So perhaps you have heard this passage explained to you many, many times and probably done a lot better than I will try to do it this morning, but it is safe for you to hear it again. It is safe.

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.⁷

Do you know what it is to worship God? Piper says it is the reflection of a joyful heart that delights in God. That is what worship is all about. It is that reflecting of our joy in God.

If I meet with you and you come over to my home in Miami, Florida and you happen to be in our home and we are sitting down next to one another and we begin to talk and you are talking to me and you are excited about being in Miami and you talk to me and I am kind of... and I am looking at my watch. I am showing you what? I am not interested.

But if my eyes are focused on you and I have got a smile on my face and I am listening to you with delight, I am showing that I have some kind of pleasure you. Worship is all about delighting ourselves in the Lord and expressing that delight.

[We] rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish.⁸

The word literally means dung, manure.

I count all these things... [as nothing but manure] that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Philippians 3:2-3.

⁸ Philippians 3:3-8.

the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.⁹

Salvation is all about righteousness. And there is man's righteousness and all of man's efforts to do things and to work hard and to be good and to be moral and there is God's righteousness. All this righteousness stinks to God.

But the righteousness which is of God is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. You and I all need a righteousness that is outside of us. There is no righteousness in any one of us. We need an outside, as Benjamin Warfield would say, an alien righteousness. We need something that we don't have. And it is a righteousness which comes to us by faith.

And he says in verse 10, "That I may know Him."¹⁰

You say, "Paul, don't you know him?" Here you are in prison for preaching the gospel. Don't you know him?"

And he would say, "Yes, I know him, but I want to continue to know him. I want to know him deeper. I want to know the depths, the lengths and the heights and the depths of the love of Christ for my soul. I want to know more about him."

Do you know what heaven is about? I am persuaded that heaven is a place where Christ is and where the people who have come to know the Lord Jesus get to know him better. And do you know what? Because his person is so infinite and wonderful, heaven is a place where we eternally get to know Christ.

And we need to say, "Oh, that I may be like Paul. I want to know him."

Well, we begin to know Christ in the suburbs of glory. That is what grace is. We are living in the suburbs of glory.

You thought you lived in Sacramento, but you don't. You live in the suburbs of glory. If you are a Christian grace is the suburbs of glory. So we should be encouraged and rejoice in Christ Jesus and be ready to worship him.

Where? How in the world can we be just mediocre Christians and we live in the suburbs of glory?

He says:

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay

⁹ Philippians 3:8-9.

¹⁰ Philippians 3:10.

hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.¹¹

Now this morning I intend for us to consider three essential elements of Christian excellence as exemplified in the life of the apostle Paul and, God willing, this evening I want to try to answer the question, make applications this evening. So if you don't think we made applications this morning, we will make them tonight.

But I would like for us to try to answer the question, Lord willing this evening: How you and I can keep from falling into the rut of Christian mediocrity.

First of all, I want to give you three essential elements of Christian excellence. But let me begin by telling you what I do not mean when I speak about Christian excellence. I don't want anyone to misunderstand what I am talking about, this expression, Christian excellence. I am not talking about Christian perfection or sinless perfection and neither was Paul.

In verse 12a he says, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected."¹²

The Christian life is all about change. The Holy Spirit begins that work of change and the work of regeneration when he comes in mighty power through his Word and he takes a sinner who is on his way to hell, living for the world and for himself. He has got a god, but he is the god of his own flesh. He lives for himself. And the Holy Spirit comes and creates life. He causes us to live. He performs renovation in our hearts. He gives us a new heart, a new mind and he sets us going in the right direction. And the Christian life proceeds with—there is a change of regeneration and then we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and repent. We are justified. But then the whole bulk of the Christian life is all about the doctrine of sanctification.

We say, "What is that doctrine?"

It is all change. It means we are going to change. It means that if you are here today and you say, "I have arrived," then you are in trouble because as Christians we are changing. Every day we need to change. When you leave this place today God forbid that you get in your car and say, "I am the same person as when I walked in." We need to be changing. The Christian life is about changing because you and I need to be conformed to the image of Christ. We are being shaped. We are being transformed into that image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so we are not talking about sinless perfection or Christian perfection. There is no such thing as sinless perfection in this life.

¹¹ Philippians 3:10-14.

¹² Philippians 3:12.

1 John chapter one verse eight, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [But] if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”¹³

Well, our ambition and our desire is to be as, according to Jesus, perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Yet true perfection, moral and spiritual perfection in this life is not going to come until we die and we meet the Lord or the trumpet of the Lord sounds and we are raised and we are caught up to be with the Lord in the air and there is a great change coming for us. But we are not going to be perfect until the Lord comes.

And then I am not talking about Christian perfection. I am not talking about some special brand of Christianity for a select few super saints. If you are a super saint this morning, just go on outside and you don't belong in here. We are not talking about super saints. First and foremost Christian excellence is a matter of the heart.

Paul says in 12b, “I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.”¹⁴

When we were going in the wrong direction, walking according to the course of this world, the Holy Spirit of Christ by his Spirit laid hold of us. He laid hold of us and the rest of our life we are running after him. He changed us from the inside out. He changes us on the inside and continues to change us.

Hebrews 8:10, “I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”¹⁵

Christian excellence is a matter of the heart. Don't forget that. Christian excellence is not about being cultured. It might have something to do with it, but that is not what we are talking about. We are not talking about being able to speak good classical Greek or listen to classical music or to dress a certain way. That is not Christian excellence. Christian excellence is the biblical norm and the requirement that we love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength and that we show we love him by the way that we live our lives. That is what Christian excellence is about.

Christian excellence is the faithful and earnest pursuit of the will of God by the grace of God for the glory of God. That is what Christian excellence is about.

And notice that the apostle expresses the idea of Christian excellence in our text in terms of pressing onward, of doing one thing, of reaching forward, of winning the prize. And, you know, Paul is not at all embarrassed to use himself as an example of Christian excellence.

¹³ 1 John 1:8-9.

¹⁴ Philippians 3:12.

¹⁵ Hebrews 8:10.

Notice verse 17.

“Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.”¹⁶

Verse nine in chapter four.

“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”¹⁷

So I would like for us to look at Paul as a prime example of what it means to exercise godliness and to pursue a course of Christian excellence.

Now keep in mind, we are not merely to consider Paul’s example, we are to follow it. We are to follow it. The first essential element of Christian excellence found in the apostle Paul was that he was a man who really knew himself. Simple. He was a person who really knew himself. Reading Paul’s letters it is easy to see that he not only knew about Christ, but he knew himself.

Notice how Paul uses the personal pronoun “I” over and over again beginning in verse four in this chapter through verse 14. And notice verse 12.

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold...”¹⁸

Verse 13. “One thing I do.”¹⁹

Verse 14. “I press toward the goal.”²⁰

He knew about himself. He knew what he was about.

I want you to turn to Romans chapter 12. Paul wrote the book of Romans also. He used himself as an example, but he tells us that we need to know ourselves.

Romans chapter 12 and verse three. “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”²¹

He does not say, “Don’t think about yourself.”

¹⁶ Philippians 3:17.

¹⁷ Philippians 4:9.

¹⁸ Philippians 3:12.

¹⁹ Philippians 3:13.

²⁰ Philippians 3:14.

²¹ Romans 12:3.

He says, “I don’t want you to think about yourself above what you ought to think. But you are to think soberly about yourself. You are to think realistically about yourself.”

We have to be able to make an honest, sober assessment of who we really are and what we are all about. A sober self assessment requires that we look at ourselves from at least three different perspectives. The first perspective we are to look at ourselves is from a biblical perspective. Every time we read the Bible we should look at the Bible like a mirror. It is a mirror and we should see our face in the mirror.

Now I know a lot of us don’t like looking at the mirror especially the older you get the harder it is to look in the mirror. Sometimes I am surprised. I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and I am shocked. There is a man with gray hair and he is old. That is not me. I have got this idea about me in my mind that is stuck there way back when I was in my 20s and 30s. And somehow this strange looking guy that I see in the mirror, I don’t like him and I could change him I would, but it is hard to change him.

So I grew a beard a few years ago when I went to Pakistan to change the guy, but he still looks funny to me.

And that is the way it is. When we read our Bibles we see ourselves and, oh, we don’t like what we see. We have a hard time looking in this mirror of God’s Word, but we need to look at ourselves. We need to see ourselves and study the reflection of that person that we really are.

James chapter one verse 23.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.²²

Listen to Spurgeon’s comments on this text in James. Here is what Spurgeon said. He says, “The mirror,” he really calls it the glass, but I substituted in brackets if you look at my notes, the brackets. “The mirror of the Word is not like our ordinary mirrors which merely shows us our external features, but according to the Greek of our text,” says Spurgeon, “the man in it sees the face of his birth. It is the face of his nature. He that reads and hears the Word may see not only his actions there, but his motives and his desires and his condition.”

And then he gives a very good illustration. That is why I am reading this comment. “As the butcher cuts down the carcass and reveals the inwards which never could have been seen but for his knife, so is the Word of God quick and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword dividing the spirit from the soul, the secrets of the man are opened up to himself and he is astonished to see his inward depravity and his carnal tendencies and his

²² James 1:23-25.

corrupt inclinations. And as a man sees his outward self in the mirror so may he see his inward self in the Word.”

Have you ever taken this moral mirror of God that he has given us and looked into it and found that it cut you up and cut you open and showed you what you are really like and showed you that you are just like a moral speck of dust and dirt? And only by the grace of God can we rise above moral dirt.

We need to see ourselves. If we are going to make a sober self assessment, we are going to know ourselves as the first step in pursuit of Christian excellence, I have got to know who I am. I have got to know who I am from a biblical perspective. Secondly, I need to know who I am from a human perspective of those who are around me.

You know, it is easy to ignore what other people say, but we shouldn't ignore their... what they say or their perceptions of us or their opinions especially those who are closest to us. And this is implied, in fact, that by the fact that we are described in verses four and five of Romans 12 as being members of one another. And in verse 16 we are told that we must not be wise in our own opinion. A fool is wise in his own heart.

In other words, it is important to consider and even seek the opinions of other people if we want to have an accurate assessment of who we are. We need the biblical perspective. We need a human perspective of those around us.

Thirdly, we need to have a perspective of the grace of God.

Verse 3d of Romans 12:3, “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”²³

Those of us who are true Christians, we are no longer the way we used to be. We have been changed. We have been changed. The grace of God is now the principle operative in our lives. We live and move and have our being by God's common grace. But as Christians now we act and we think. The primary operative principle in our lives is the grace of God if you are a Christian.

For by grace we have been saved through faith, not of ourselves. It is a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast, but we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works.

Paul could say in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”²⁴

And it is interesting, that text. If you look at it in the original, it is as if we were like an instrument and God is using the instrument, a hammer. We use the hammer. And God is the one that moves us and motivates us.

²³ Romans 12:3.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:10.

It is the grace of God in us and we need to look at ourselves from a biblical perspective, a human perspective and from a gracious perspective so that we can come to know what we are all about. The apostle Paul is a pattern of Christian excellence because he knew who he was from these different perspectives.

Secondly, the second element, Paul was a man with a passion for Jesus Christ. And [?] himself, but he was also a man with passion.

Turn back to Philippians chapter three verse 14.

“I press toward the goal.”²⁵

Paul was a man who was pressing on toward a goal. And the verb “to press” is often translated “persecute.” It means to chase someone or something. An accurate self assessment and a corresponding desire and love for Christ will make a true believer earnest and determined and active in the Christian life.

The apostle illustrates this determination and this passion by using two word pictures. The first is the picture of a person chasing something very desirable or very precious. He is chasing something very precious.

Now think of that for a minute. You remember, some of you parents, some of you have little toddlers. Maybe you have a three year old, just learned to walk. And now they can walk well enough and run well enough to get into trouble. And here they are in the front yard playing and you are sitting down reading a book and this little one is playing with a ball and the ball drops and starts to roll in the road and the little toddler starts to run after the ball and there is cars coming down the road. All right? What do you do?

You run after the baby. That is my baby. And your goal is to catch it. Catch that little one before the little one runs out into the street.

Paul was a passionate man with a passion for Christ. He was chasing something very precious. And the thing that drove Paul’s faith and made him so earnest and determined to press forward in the Christian life was the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ in saving mercy had taken hold of him.

He said, “Jesus laid hold of me and because the Lord has laid hold on me, I am doing all that I can to lay hold of him, because he is precious to me.”

Let me ask you. How is it that some of us can be so lazy, careless and undisciplined in the Christian life when the Lord Jesus came into this world to lay hold of us and he did.

²⁵ Philippians 3:14.

You know, it is like that mother or that father that is reading the book and the little one starts running out in the road chasing the ball and we just kind of say, “Hey, don’t go out in the road,” and they keep on running and we don’t get up. We are too lazy to get up.

You say, “That is crazy.”

It is crazy to call yourself a Christian and to be lazy for Christ, to be undisciplined, to be negligent.

Brethren nothing about our Savior was mediocre. Jesus was earnest and determined and full of passion. And don’t you think he deserves something better from us than half hearted inconsistent whatever is convenient kind of effort?

The second illustration, the first one is a person chasing something very precious. The second one is the picture of a person pushing himself to the limit.

Verse 14. “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”²⁶

Here is a runner straining his muscles and his nerves to reach forward. There is the goal. There is the ribbon and he is reaching or pressing himself forward to make it across the line first. Paul was a man not only determined to finish his course, he was a man that was determined to win the race. He didn’t want second place. He wanted to get first place across that line. He was stretching himself out to win the prize. He was willing to spend himself and to be spent that he might win Christ.

Paul was a man with a passion for life. Paul was a man who had a passion for people. He was a man with a passion for the gospel. He is the man that had a passion for the Church. But the all consuming passion of the apostle Paul was for Christ and his glory.

Notice verse eight.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain [or win] Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;²⁷

And then in the third place Paul was not only a man who knew himself and a man of passion, but Christian excellence, if we are going to pursue it, we need to be single minded as Paul was single minded.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Philippians 3:8-9.

His faith was focused, verse 13. “One thing I do.”²⁸

Paul’s one single ambition and focus in life was to press forward for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. To the apostle life had little or no meaning outside our Lord’s words, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”²⁹

You say, “But pastor Wheeler, you know, Paul lived in a time when everything was so laid back and slow. I mean Paul didn’t have all the things that we have to deal with. We live in a complex world. Get with it. We live in a complex world. There are so many things pressing us and pulling us and stretching us. We have got this to do. I have got to run Sally to gymnastics and I have got to go here and I have got to go there and I have got to do this and we have got to have these people over. Got to do. We have so many things to do. I have got to work and I have got to... Oh, there is so much to do. Our life is so complex.”

Well, it may be, I am not sure, but it may be, maybe more complex than the life at the time of the apostle Paul, maybe. Let’s just give the benefit of the doubt if you have that argument. And there is many things we have to do, but if you are a Christian you have... here is the definition of a Christian. Here is Jesus’ definition. If you are going to follow me, deny yourself, take up the cross and follow me. That is what a Christian is. And if you have done that then your priority is Christ. And you should be able to say in the midst of all the complexities of this life, “One thing is foremost. And this one thing I will do. Other things may not have third, fourth and fifth priority, but this one thing has number one priority, one thing I do.”

He was single minded. And Paul’s single mindedness as a Christian had two parts to it, two parts to it.

Verse 13. “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, [first part] forgetting those things which are behind.”³⁰

The first part is Paul had an attitude of holy forgetfulness. Some of us have some unholy forgetfulness. I forget everything, everything, everything. Paul had an attitude of holy forgetfulness.

Some people have been stuck in the past and they are living on yesterday’s faith or reliving yesterday’s failures. Some churches are living in the past, living on yesterday’s faith or reliving yesterday’s failures over and over and over again.

²⁸ Philippians 3:13.

²⁹ Matthew 6:33.

³⁰ Philippians 3:13.

And if you and I, as Christians, are ever going to make any spiritual progress in the Christian life, we have got to put it behind us anything and everything that hinders our spiritual progress.

We need to get over the past.

I have a daughter who is 25 years old, Meagan. She has Down's Syndrome. And she tells me that she wants to get married and she does. And she tells me and I say things like, "But, honey, you are my little girl."

And she says, "Daddy, get over it. I am a woman now. Get over it."

Now, maybe that is humorous, but she understands she wants me to get over it. We need to get over some things. You need to get over some things as a church.

I will be honest with you. I love you folks. There were more people here last year than there are this year. Maybe that is good. Maybe that is not.

I don't know what happens in the interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of this church and there is a tendency when there is a problem to kind of get fold into ourselves and think about ourselves. You know the best way to get out of this, out of that tendency and that attitude? It is to think about the world instead of thinking about Immanuel Baptist Church. You need an attitude of holy forgetfulness. Get over it. Get over the past. Get over all... and let me back up again. We are going to individuals and deal with individuals, not churches, but the same things apply, ok? Get over, first of all, get over... we need to get over all our past sins and failures, all our past sins and failures. And we need to believe what the Bible says about forgiveness.

The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins. When I look, when I go down and I look at the Scriptures and I see the cellar of my soul and I go down into that cellar, I remember when I was a boy living in Connecticut we had a dark cellar. For some reason the light was never on down there. And when I had to go get something I would take a flashlight. I didn't like to go down there. It was dark and it was damp and there were bugs and there were spiders and there were even little mice down there and I didn't like to go down there as a little boy, down in that cellar.

And there is a lot of nasty things in the cellar of our souls and we should take that walk and take the flashlight of the Word of God and look down there in that cellar. Don't be afraid. See what is down there.

And if I take all of those nasty things that are down there in the cellar of my soul and I begin to write them and if some angel were to write them it would be written across the walls all the way down in the lowest font and all around this building and all around back here and on the floor and all these sins of my whole life would be written there and all my failures would be written there.

And then if the same angel were to continue to write and write and start at the first row and be writing all around and all our sins and failures all of them together, take them all and put them together, do you know what they amount to?

Although they are grievous and egregious to God and ourselves, yet the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.³¹

Our sins, all of our sins collectively, as nasty and horrible as they are would be like a drop of crude oil put into an ocean of clear water and they would dissipate and dissolve. It dissolves into nothingness because of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Get over it. If you have confessed your sins—and we are not saying forget about them. I am saying confess them.

“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”³²

Get over it. Don’t hold on. Don’t try to be more holy than God and continue to remember them.

He says, “Your sins and your lawless deeds I will remember no more. I will cast them into the depths of the sea.”

“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”³³

Get over it.

Now if you are here this morning and you are not a Christian and you have sinned against God over and over again and you could care less, you better get to it. But if you are a Christian and you come to the Lord Jesus and your heart is sensitive and tender, get over your sins and get over your failures. Don’t be stuck in the past.

Some of us have made some grievous mistakes, but the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins.

In the second place, may we get over all our past sins and failures. Second, we need to get over all the past sins and failures of others. To carry grudges and disappointments and hurts from one year to the next, to feed our self pity or a bitter spirit is wickedness. Get over it.

³¹ 1 John 2:1-2.

³² 1 John 1:9.

³³ Psalm 103:12.

Hebrews 12:15. “The root of bitterness springing up causes trouble and by this many become defiled.”

Get over it.

Matthew 6:14.

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.³⁴

Forgiveness is not just a nice thing to do. It is the necessary thing to do. Forgiveness is an attitude of the heart. Think about it.

But someone says, “But, pastor, do you know what? You know, so and so sinned against me and they have never come to ask my forgiveness and so how can I forgive them?”

Well, we need to confess our sins to God. You can’t get forgiveness by osmosis. However, what Jesus is talking about is that attitude, heart attitude, a willingness to forgive like the Father of the prodigal son who is running around partying with his inheritance that he got. The father was waiting and ready for him to come back. It wasn’t his bitter spirit, “Oh, that bad son that I have. He is so bad.” But a willingness and a longing and the yearning of the heart towards him, ready to forgive.

Remember that the Lord Jesus had pity upon those who were killing him and they were laughing as he hung on the cross. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”³⁵

That doesn’t mean that God forgave all those people their sins just because Jesus asked him to. No, no. But it does mean, I believe, that many of those people were right there mocking him, were on the day of Pentecost there and heard Peter preach that sermon and said, “Brethren, what shall we do? What shall we do?”

They were cut to the heart.

We need to get over the past sins and failures of others. Stop hanging on to them.

Bitterness, feeding bitterness and self pity is wickedness.

In the third place we need to get over past achievements and successes and sacrifices and service. Get over it.

³⁴ Matthew 6:14-15.

³⁵ Luke 23:34.

Paul said, “The things that were gain for me are loss for Christ. These things made me get a big head and think that I am somebody when I am really nobody.”

Well, that is not good. That is bad. Stop thinking about the good old days when you used to witness for Christ, when you used to have a Bible study at school or in the workplace, when you used to fast and to pray, when you used to read the Bible through every year. Stop thinking about those days when you used to give out tracts in the neighborhood.

What are you doing now? What are you doing now? Forget about the past. Let it go. Get over it. Living in the past will keep you from serving Christ in the present. Get over it.

This single mindedness of a Christian man—and the apostle Paul exemplifies it—begins with an attitude of holy forgetfulness and it continues with an activity of a focused faith, activity of a focused faith.

“Forgetting those things which are behind,”³⁶ what does he do? “Reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the mark.”³⁷

Literally stretching forward as that runner stretches forward. I am reaching forward. With all his energy the believer, he has to run the Christian race with but a focused faith looking unto Jesus the author and the finisher of our faith.

What are some of these things? Notice the text in verse 13.

“But one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.”³⁸

The question is: What are those things that are ahead of us? What are those things of which we are to be reaching forward to?

Well, the activity of the focused faith will always take into account those things. What are they?

Number one, the difficulties, discouragements and disappointments which are ahead of each one of us. They are there.

Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”³⁹

“In the world you will have tribulation.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Philippians 3:13.

³⁷ Philippians 3:13-14.

³⁸ Philippians 3:13.

³⁹ John 16:33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

It is difficult to enter the kingdom of heaven and there are difficulties and discouragements and disappointments that are ahead of us. Tomorrow we don't know what a day may bring forth. And there are things that we don't want.

If we were God—I have often thought about this—I wouldn't bring this and this into my life. I would make it easy. I would have an easy way for me.

But I am not God and I am thankful.

God has a way for us and the way is not easy because he is stretching our faith. And if our faith is not focused, we are always going to struggle. We have to have a focused faith and we have to reach forward to those difficulties and disappointments and the problems and the trials that are ahead of us.

Proverbs 22:3. “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, But the simple pass on and are punished.”⁴¹

The activity of a focused faith takes into account those things that I don't like that are coming the tomorrow or the next day or the next day.

Secondly, the activity of a focused faith takes into account the snares and the temptations to sin that are all around us.

There are lots of temptations in this world. This world is full of attractions and distractions. And my heart is full of iniquity. And there is like a magnet and there are certain things that just attract me and cause me to have problems. There are temptations and there are snares that are ahead tomorrow. Not only these problems around us—and they are all around us everywhere we go—but they are in us.

Listen to the Puritan Thomas Brooks. He says, “As long as there is fuel in our hearts for a temptation, we cannot be secure. He that hath gun powder about him had need to keep far enough off from the sparks.”

We need to reach forward to those things. We need to realize that there are some temptations ahead of us. And there are snares ahead of us and we need to be ready for them because we have hearts that are prone to wander. Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.

And so Jesus said in Mark 14:38, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”⁴²

We need to with a focused faith we need to take into account those difficulties and disappointments that are at those temptations and snares that are it.

⁴¹ Proverbs 22:3.

⁴² Mark 14:38.

Thirdly, and those are all negative. But we need to reach forward. Thirdly, we need to reach forward and take into account with our focused faith the marvelous, mysterious providence of God.

I don't know what is going to come tomorrow. I hope to be able to fly back to Miami, but I really don't know if I am going to make it. I hope I do. And I believe I will. But you can never tell. Maybe there is some other thing will happen and we will be diverted. I will end up in a snowstorm in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I don't know what is going to happen.

But I do know this, that we do not know what a day may bring forth. We know the one who brings forth the day. And whatever God brings whether he brings prosperity or he brings problems, whether he brings forth triumphs or troubles the believer with a focused faith can reach forward to that day, reach forward to those things which are ahead. And we can reach forward with confidence that the God of all providence will work all things together for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.

What e'er my God ordains as right, holy his will abides. I will be still whate'er he does and follow where he guides. He is my God, though dark my road he holds me that I shall not fall. Wherefore to him I leave it all.

And so the believer with the activity of a focused faith he gives everything over to God and he relishes and takes into account the marvelous, mysterious providence of God.

Fourthly, we need to also take into account something else, not only God's providence, but in part that providence is provisions of grace.

Do you know why we are reaching forward? You say I don't like to reach forward to problems. I don't like to reach forward to snares and temptations. Yes, but the rich provisions of the grace of God are forward also. And so we reach forward. This makes us really stretch. God's grace is not only unmerited favor toward us, but God's grace is his unlimited power working in us and through us and for us.

In Ephesians 1:19 Paul says, "I am praying for you, church of Ephesus, I am praying that your spiritual eyes will be opened, that you may be able to see what is the exceeding greatness of God's power towards you who believe. I want you to see his mighty power on your behalf."

You see, we are so dull minded and so spiritually insensitive and so narrow focused that we can't see the rich provisions of God's grace that he has for us tomorrow or ahead of us.

Ephesians 6:10. "Be strong in the Lord."⁴³

⁴³ Ephesians 6:10.

You say, "I am weak. I have no strength. I have no energy, no physical energy."

Get up in the morning and say, "Oh, God, your Word says to be strong in you and in the power of your might. And you have said that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. Oh, God, by faith, my faith is focused on your Word and your promises. I believe you. Make me strong to do whatever you want me to do today."

And then reaching forward we have got these rich provisions of grace, got these marvelous, mysterious [?] ahead of us and things that are in this providence. But then there is something even more wonderful, the prize of the upward call of God.

Verse 14. That is the reward of faith. That is ahead of us. That is why we reach forward.

2 Timothy 4:7-8.

I have fought the good fight, [Paul says] I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.⁴⁴

We get caught up in the rat's race of this world and so focused inwardly. We get in our little comfort zones and we enjoy our little comfort zones and Turkey is a million years away from, a million miles away from us and China and all these other... and even Sacramento is so far away from our little comfort zones. And we don't want to break outside our comfort zones.

Well, that is not running the race. Running the race means you break out of the comfort zones. And you are faithful to God. And you fight the fight and you run the race and you pursue a course of Christian excellence with an activity of focused faith.

There used to be a hymn that some of us used to sing. It goes like this.

I am pressing on the upward way,
New heights I am gaining every day.
Still praying as I am onward bound,
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.

I want to get off this comfort zone ground.

Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith on Heaven's table land.
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

⁴⁴ 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

Dear ones, don't be content to live a C class Christian life. Be zealous for the kingdom of God. Be earnest. Forget those things which are behind. You will never go forward unless you do. Forget them. And reach forward to those things which are before. Press on.

This evening, God willing, we hope to give you some specific directions on how you and I can keep from falling into that rut of Christian mediocrity. May God bless your meditations this afternoon.

Let's pray.

Our Father and our God, how can we not thank you enough for what you have done for us in Christ? We thank you for the Lord Jesus. We thank you that he was and continues to be zealous for our salvation. We thank you for your rich provisions of grace. We thank you that you have promised an eternal inheritance for your people. We thank you that you are the one that has ordained all that will happen tomorrow, that all things happen according to the counsel of your own will. We thank you that you have promised and we are sure and we are confident that since you have begun a good work in us, you will perform it until the day of Christ. And we are confident and we are thankful and we extol you and exalt you that you have promised that all things will work together for good to those who love you. And we love you. Our Father, we love you. We love you, Lord Jesus. We love you, blessed Spirit of God. Help us. Forgive us for holding on to the past. Forgive us for being lazy. Forgive us for being satisfied doing little or nothing. Forgive us for being lukewarm. Forgive us. Forgive the preacher. Forgive your people. Please forgive us and energize our faith, oh God. Animate our spirits, we pray. Help us for Jesus' sake. Amen.