

Pressing On

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Date: 06 April 2025

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[0 : 00] Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, we are grateful for the fact that your word speaks livingly to us. We pray that by the power of the Spirit that you will speak to each of us today. May we receive your living word.

And we particularly pray for those who are being confirmed and received that today they may be ministered to you from the word of God. We may be all encouraged in our faith and our walk with you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen. I know and greatly admire the nature of the pulpit that you have at Advent where you receive week after week thoughtful and relevant messages of how the gospel of Jesus Christ speaks clearly and specifically to the issues that you're facing in your real life.

Living in a city that is probably the most issue-oriented city in the world, right? If anybody needs to know how to face issues with the gospel, it is people who live in this place. I'm confident, therefore, you're a congregation that knows how to listen earnestly and listen well, which I'm glad because we're going to be doing some things today that will test your concentration.

I'm going to be reading to you a couple of long quotes, and I'm going to try to read them well so that you can listen to them well. I'm going to begin with a quote from George MacDonald.

[1 : 27] In fact, I'm going to end with a quote from George MacDonald. George MacDonald was a 19th century Scottish pastor and preacher and writer. He wrote 22 works of fantasy, 30 works of fiction, 14 volumes of poetry, and 13 works of Christian theology.

This boy could produce, okay? And that's all without MS Word, if you can believe that or not. Can you imagine? So from creation in Christ, we read this.

Man cannot originate this life within himself.

It must be shown him, given him, and he must choose it. God is the father of Jesus and of us, of every possibility of our being. As Paul says to the Athenians, we all live and move and have our very being in God, and we are all children of God, all humanity.

But while God is the father of his children, Jesus is the father of our sonship. For in him is made the life which is sonship to the father, the recognition, namely, in fact and in life, that the father has laid his claim on us as his sons and daughters.

[3 : 00] We are not and cannot become true sons and daughters without our willing his will. Our doing following his making.

It was the will of Jesus to be the thing that God willed and meant him to be that made him the true son of God. He was not the son of God because he couldn't help it, but because he willed to be in himself the son that he was in the divine idea and will.

So it is with us. Because we must be the sons and daughters that we are. We are not made to be what we cannot help be. Sons and daughters are not after such a fashion.

We are sons and daughters in God's claim. We must be sons and daughters in our will. And we can be sons and daughters saved into the original necessity and bliss of our being only by choosing God for the father that he is and doing his will.

George MacDonald is riffing off of a principle for God's promises and will to become reality in our lives, for his vision for us to become our experience.

[4 : 15] We must meet those promises, those statements to us, that vision for us, and receive them by faith that moves into choices and actions to live into what we have been promised.

Now, George MacDonald being a thoroughly orthodox man is echoing a principle that every New Testament writer seems to make clear. And I want you to listen carefully, please, if you will, to what I'm going to read.

I'm going to read a few verses from Peter, John, and the Hebrews, and then on into Paul. In 2 Peter 1, verse 3, his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

God begins this whole story by grace, right? He gives us everything we need. He gives us everything we need to be alive and to follow him. Through the true knowledge of him who has called us into his own glory and excellence, by which he's granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through him, through them, you might become partakers of the divine nature.

By the way, the patristic fathers riffed on that phrase. You could actually become partakers of the divine nature. That's what George MacDonald's talking about, by the way. Actually becoming one with God.

[5 : 32] Having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful flesh, sinful desire. For this very reason, for all these promises that have been given to us, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue.

And he goes on to talk about what they're in. In other words, live up to what we are called to be. See, John says in 1 John chapter 3, see what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God.

In the love of God, you're called a child of God. And so we are. The reason why the world doesn't know us is because it didn't know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, right now. But what we will be has not yet appeared.

It's going to get better, okay? But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

In other words, if that's what we're going to be, let's live like it. Let's move in that direction. The book of Hebrews says it this way. Therefore, lift up drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

[6 : 39] Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one shall see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God. You've been given the grace of God. Now obtain the grace of God.

Live into it in your fullest sense of the word. Without active faith, this willing and doing, we will not enter this beautiful house that has been created for us.

This place where we are made to live that will become our true heart home if we live into it. And we have to move in that direction. We have to make choices.

This is not an obscure principle in the New Testament. But what I find in my relationships, just in my own struggle with myself and my own reality of my humanity and with people I know and all the kinds of people I talk to, the core of Christian faith, meaning living into what God wills, is something that we often fall short of.

We baptize our own desires as Christians and think somehow or another that what we want must be what God wants. And we don't even stop to ask the question, is that really true? We just run on ahead.

[7 : 45] And in fact, what I think God is saying to us is step back, take a moment, pray, think. Do the hard and earnest and serious work of finding out whether what you're inclined to do is what I will you to do.

Because it doesn't always match up. And there's an opportunity for you to grow into what I want you to be, my will for you as your good and heavenly father.

And without doing this, we'll either end up in blind presumption or in genuine angst whether or not we are truly the children of God. We go down that road of not ever thinking about whether or not we do the will of God.

There'll be moments in our time when we wonder whether or not we really are even followers of God. And St. John talks about that as well in 1 John chapter 3. Now, all of that is lead up to the passage in Philippians that we read.

And so, if you have it in your bulletin or if you have it in your Bible, please turn to Philippians chapter 3. Because Paul expresses this very same principle clearly in Philippians 3.

[8 : 46] We're going to look at it for the next few minutes. This concept of intentionally grabbing on to what we have been given.

Of making it our own. And this expression in Philippians 3 is very visual. Verse 12. Not that I've already obtained this or I'm already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Jesus Christ has made me his own.

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let any of us who are mature think this way. If anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that to you. God will let you know if you're not doing this, guys. He will poke you on the shoulder. He'll tap you on the shoulder and say, hey, wake up, guys.

Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Press on. Grab on to what you have been grabbed hold of.

[9 : 51] Psalm chapter 40 says that we have been grabbed and pulled out of the miry clay, a miry pit. Imagine this hands coming down to pull us out of this pit of death. And the only concept is you've had the hand reach out to you, grab the hand and pull on it with all your worth.

It is God's grace that is pulling you into life. Grab the back. And I'm sure if you thought about it, you could come up with an illustration in your own life where this could be like a, you could experience something like this.

Years ago, Sally and I went to the Acadia National Park. And we loved to hike. And as we were hiking, we ran across and the path led us to the face of a cliff. Oh, this is interesting.

We're about to do some cliff climbing, okay? And I went ahead of Sally and up kind of across the crest of the curve because the cliff actually kind of leaned outwards.

So you had to, you didn't know what was on the other side. And over the, up on, about on the edge there, there were some iron rungs. So you got on it, got started on it, but then you had to grab the iron rungs and pull yourself the rest of the way.

[10 : 57] So I went up ahead of her and I kept saying, Sally, come on up. You can do it. You can do it. And so, and understandably, we were both scared. I do not love hanging out backwards over a cliff, you know, 1300 feet above the ground.

But nevertheless, we were doing it. And I said, come on up. And I said, I'll grab your hand. And she kind of reached up and kind of grabbed that rung, that first rung. And then I grabbed her and pulled her the rest of the way.

And believe me, she held on, okay? She held on for due life. Let me just say something. Sally has a far greater hand up in Jesus than she does in Steve, okay?

When it comes to her safety and security and her ability to climb through crazy things that God may call us to do, she has a hand that will not let her go. And she has a booster that will not let her go.

But think about those kinds of experiences in your life. When you realize in order to make progress, you had to grab on to what was held out to you, the hand that was held out to you. And that's the big picture that Paul is expressing in this passage.

[12 : 03] But in order for that to become reality, he had to make a number of choices. And that backs it up to what we read earlier in that he had to face his own pharisaical self-righteousness, his own religious legalism, his own sense of adequacy.

Paul had this very strong conviction of what was right or wrong. And he had very high standards. And he says back in a passage that we actually didn't read that he, and I'll read it for you just in a second, that he had met all the standards that had been laid out for him.

Verse 3, excuse me, I think that's where it begins. Verse 4, though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also, if anyone thinks he has reason for 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, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

I couldn't possibly claim that. I don't think many people can. But he says according to the standards of righteousness, he was the star pupil. He had done it all right. He had reached the pinnacle.

His standards were quite high. And he said, I reached those standards. I was called to a life of holiness and morality and ethics and worship. And he claims to have reached that pinnacle.

[13 : 20] For in our world, by the way, we make the same kinds of claims. I've reached the pinnacle, but our standards are very, very low, right? I'm good enough on my own for God to approve me.

He created me the way I am. I'm born who I am. My job is to simply be true to myself and my own desires and inclinations. I've climbed every mountain. I've followed every dream. I have enough love in my heart to satisfy my desire to love the people who are worthy of my love.

I've been a generally nice guy. Not perfect, but who is? And what right does God have to judge me? I think at the heart of our very rights-oriented culture, all of us as human beings have this kind of secret thing.

What right do I have to be judged? Because I've done my best and I've been most earnest as I possibly can be. St. Paul had very rigorous standards.

And he'd reached the pinnacle. But in an instant on the Damascus Road, he knew he'd been completely wrong because he saw the risen Jesus.

[14 : 30] See, in his background, he'd had a couple of truths that were rolling around in his mind. First of all, he understood from his Old Testament faith, his Jewish faith, that sacrifice required death.

He knew that. But he also had in his Jewish faith the concept very clearly imprinted that cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.

So when he saw Jesus on the cross, through the eyes of flesh, he talks about through the eyes of flesh, he evaluated him as judged and cursed by God. That story over.

Jesus is a reject. He can't possibly be the Christ because he's been rejected and cursed by God. But when he saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and especially when he heard the words of Jesus, which were, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Do you realize what else Jesus could have said to him at that point in time? You enemy of God, I crush you. I reject you. You've rejected me.

[15 : 38] I reject you. But that's not what Jesus said. Jesus had words of invitation and invited him into a conversation and said, I want you to look at me and consider me. And at that point in time, Saul was undone.

He had no question in his mind that Jesus was the risen Lord. He saw him in his glory. He was blinded on the road to Damascus. And for three days, he had the opportunity to sit in blindness to reevaluate his entire theology.

But you know what happened? He didn't change his theology. He just changed his understanding of Jesus. Because, in fact, it is true that blood is required for forgiveness.

Death is required. It's baked into the very, I mean, ever since Abel, ever since the Garden of Eden, there's been an understanding that blood, death, was required for life.

Jewish religion had that clearly marked. But it's also true that cursed is the one who hangs on a tree. And as Paul thought about that, I'm sure what came into his mind was Isaiah chapter 53, when it says that he bore our sins for our iniquities.

[16 : 55] He died. He bore the guilt of us. He began to put it together and realize that, in fact, it was true that Jesus bore the curse. It was true that he died for our sins.

And it was true that God was in Christ reconciling the world himself, not counting their trespasses against them. But he who knew no sin, he made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God.

And so in that moment, in those three days, Paul completely reevaluated his life. And the sense of his own adequacy, he threw it away.

He just discarded it. Let me talk to us together. Confidence in our own adequacy and worth is a very fragile state of mind.

It requires us to continue to maintain a sense that we are esteemed and recognized and honored and that people have affection for us.

[17 : 57] But if that begins to be shaky, then our adequacy is shaken. It requires a desire for power and control so that we can make the decisions and make things happen around us and be in a sense of impact and achievement.

But when that starts to fall apart, our adequacy becomes shaky. We desire security and survival. Always desperately trying to maintain that.

If we get shaky, then our sense of adequacy is at stake. We can categorize those things in a myriad of ways. But Paul says, I forfeited, I cast aside all those things.

They were no gain for me in comparison to the incomparable goodness of a relationship with Jesus. So therefore, I have bent my heart and mind to grow in my union with Jesus.

To live a resurrection life now is what he says. To live now as I will be in eternity. To carry my cross daily in conformity to Christ.

[19 : 08] And to do that. And the strength of his passion and his drive is what's expressed in verses 12 through 16. Now, my hope is that my message is clear.

The Christian life is a call to live into the promises and hopes of our eternal life. And it requires will, choice, endurance, perseverance. Like McDonald says, we have to will what God has willed for us.

You might ask me, well, what about grace? Bishop Steve, isn't the Christian life rooted in grace? And I would say absolutely. There's absolutely nothing I've said that negates the grace of God. In that passage where Paul talks about what Christ did for us, he also says the love of Christ controls us.

Having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Christ. It all starts with Christ and him dying for us.

And we know that. We're standing in grace, reaching for the high calling of Christ. What about rest in Christ? You're describing a life that sounds pretty stressful. But I was praying even just yesterday and before the time of the conformance, a prayer that was given to me.

[20 : 19] It wasn't my own. It was given to me. That I would find the rest for my soul in the love and presence of God. Now, brothers and sisters, today, you can find rest for your soul every moment, any moment, every place, any time, in the knowledge of the love and the presence of God.

Just take a moment. Just take a moment in the stress. Calm your mind down a little bit. Calm our minds and think about the love and the presence of God.

Promises all through the scripture. I will never leave you or forsake you. I am always with you. Come to me, all you that are weary and are heavy laden. I will give you rest. There are times that we need a good soaking in grace.

There are times when we need to be kicked in the rear and told to get in action. But we always need rest. We always need that rest.

Correct? We always need to know the love and the presence of God. So let me end with another quote from George, one of my good buddies. I love this one.

[21 : 32] And this will be enough. He's in conversation with somebody and the person says to him, but I do not know how to awake and arise from my bed of lethargy.

I will tell you, get up and do something the master tells you. And so make yourself his disciple at once. Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said do it.

Or once abstain from something because he said don't do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe or even want to believe if you do nothing he tells you to do. If you can think of nothing he's ever said as having an atom of influence on your doing or not doing, you have good reason to wonder whether or not you're his disciple.

But you can begin at once. Today. To be an active disciple of Jesus, of the living one, by obeying him in the very first thing you can think of which you're not obeying him.

My guess is that every one of us in this room could think of something. Every one of us could say there's something we are being called to do. We must learn to obey him. And we must begin somewhere.

[22 : 43] Let it be at once. Today. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ■ ■ ■ ■ ■