

Going for Goal

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 8th of June 1997. The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker.

The sermon is entitled Going for Goal and is from Philippians chapter 3 verses 12 to 21.

Our God, we thank you that our Lord Jesus Christ is our treasure in heaven and we pray that we will have our sights set on him this morning and for his glory. Amen.

Linford Christie won the 100 metres at the 1992 Olympic Games. And I remember seeing a slow motion replay of him running. It wasn't the normal scene where the whole group runs from left to right across the screen.

But rather it was watching him running towards the camera at the end of the straight and the camera was on him and him alone. And he was a study of fitness, of muscles moving, of strength and energy and rhythm, concentration, effort.

[1 : 27] That final desperate lunge at the finishing tape. You can see him straining everything in his body to get there first. But the thing that I remember most of watching that slow motion replay of him running towards the camera in effect were the eyes.

The eyes were wide open, staring straight ahead, intent at getting to the finishing line first. It seemed to me, though, he probably did blink, that for the 9.9 seconds or whatever it took to run the race, he didn't blink at all.

Eyes open, staring straight in front. And that's a model for the Christian life. Christian life's not casual or carefree, meandering or purposeless, looking back over our shoulder, looking around at what's happening around about us.

But rather, the analogy that Paul uses in this passage in Philippians 3 is that of a runner running a race. And the Christian life is like Linford Christie running that 100 metres, intent, focused on the finishing line at the end of the race.

The goal, of course, is not a physical race. The goal of the Christian life is, as we saw last week, to be found in Christ.

[2 : 54] Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but rather one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. That's Paul's goal of his Christian life, as we saw last week.

That on the final day, the day of judgment before the throne of Christ, he will be able to stand righteous because of God's righteousness and be found in Christ.

Only then will Paul know that he has shared in the death and become like Jesus in his death. And only then will he know to its full extent the power of Jesus' resurrection.

So he continued on in the passage that we had read for us this morning. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

If somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead. Not that he has a doubt that he's ever going to make it, but the somehow means he doesn't know the circumstances, how he will die, when he will die, where he will die, or even if Jesus may return before his death.

[4 : 09] That's the somehow, that's the uncertainty. That's Paul's goal is to be found in Christ on the final day. And so he goes on in verse 12 to say, not that I've already obtained this or have already reached the goal.

He hasn't as a Christian. But I press on to make it my own. Pressing on with energy and effort and concentration. The word is a strong word to press on.

And it's grounded in what Christ has already done. Because I press on to, in effect, seize Christ because Christ has already seized me. So Paul recognises a balance between what God has done which makes us Christian people, Christ, if you like, seizing us and making us his own, and then our effort which is expended in order to achieve the final goal.

That we may seize what Christ has seized us for. Modern Christianity so often is very different from what Paul is describing here.

So often the modern church is uncertain, wavering, confused, or meandering. All too often it is casual and carefree. Very often its focus is behind, looking back over the shoulder to the good old days.

[5 : 27] When the church was full, the church was significant and influential in society, the Sunday school was overflowing, etc. The great old days. Let's keep our focus back in the past. Or sometimes the focus of the church is on the world around about.

So it's looking at what the world is doing, like as if you could imagine Linford Christie running a race, but looking at the spectator, seeing if he can spot his mum in the crowd or something. Very often the church has got its focus around about on the world and the values and concerns of this world. But rather, we are to look ahead. So Paul uses the athletic analogy in verses 13 and 14. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, doesn't mean literally in a sense forgetting as though he doesn't remember what happened, but rather putting all the behind to one side.

Whether it's the past achievements or past glories or past difficulties, put it to one side. And straining forward to what lies ahead. Like the athlete at the end of a sprint.

Pushing that body further. Trying to get the chest or the head or the arm across the line first.

Pushing that last little bit for a fraction of a second. That's the idea of straining forward to reach the goal.

[6 : 52] That's to be the Christian life. Full of effort and concentration and purpose. So he says forgetting what lies behind. straining forward to what lies ahead.

I press on toward the goal. The finishing tape of that final day being found in Jesus Christ. Standing righteous in God's sight because of Christ.

You may have read in the local paper this week a little interview with Paul Salmon, the Hawthorne footballer who won some premierships with Essendon in the 80s. he was asked what are his most treasured possessions and he said his premiership medals.

No doubt recalling the time at the end of a grand final when the master of ceremonies or the dignitary whoever would read out the names of the players of the winning team.

Paul Salmon the crowd would cheer and he would come up to the dais to receive his medal. It's a little bit like the Olympic Games where there's a three tiered dais the top tier for the winner and you probably have seen at the end of Olympic ceremonies the name of the gold medalist being read out Kieran Perkins crowd erupts and up comes Kieran Perkins to the top of the dais.

[8 : 09] It's the same in the ancient world. There would be an upward call to the dais for the victor of the event. Maybe even the emperor occasionally would present the medal.

And that's the analogy that Paul has in mind at the end of verse 14. Having run the race and won the race he says he presses on presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

That is not that the emperor or some AFL dignitary is going to call up the winner to the dais but that God himself will call up those who finish the Christian race the Christian life on that final day.

St. Paul come up here and that's Paul's goal if you like to be on that final day called up the upward call or the heavenly call by God in Christ because the only way that we will make that race and finish that race and be found in Christ is because of what Jesus has done for us in the end on the cross.

That's the goal that Paul strives to like an athlete. That's what his Christian life is all about. Final day being able to stand before God righteous with God's righteousness.

[9 : 35] Paul's determination focus is an example for us. We're not to sit back and think oh it was all very well for St. Paul he was a great leader. He could be like that.

He could be focused. No his example is for us to follow as well. So he goes on in verse 15 to say let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind and if you think differently about anything this too God will reveal to you only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

What he's saying there is that there might be minor differences they don't really matter in the end God will make all that sort all that out. What is really important is to focus the determination to the end let us hold fast to what we have attained.

And he writes this fairly tactfully I think. He says let those of us who are mature have this same mind. Well who wouldn't want to be mature? Who would want to sit back and say well I'm immature?

It's a tactful way of embracing everybody and saying let us all have this same mind. Let us be unified together in the pursuit of the goal of standing on the final day before Christ and being found righteous in him.

[10:52] So we are to imitate Paul. We are to imitate his concentration and determination to that final goal that finishing tape of standing righteous in Christ on the last day.

We are to imitate those who grow rather than stand still or stagnate. We are to imitate those who are pursuing the final goal rather than those who are stopping by the way to have a little tea break or something at the 50 meter mark.

The idea of imitating Paul and others like him who are pursuing the goal should influence all our behaviour day by day in our Christian lives. Let me give some examples to show what I mean.

That if the goal, that final goal is in our focus, then it will affect the things we do and don't do today and tomorrow and every day. So if we're, if we have some sinful temptation or pleasure that is at hand, we think, know I'm going to shun that for the sake of the final goal.

Because if I pursue sinful pleasure today, then I will not make that final goal. I will not be found righteous in Christ if I forsake that and pursue sinful pleasure now. But I know that if I pursue that final goal, the pleasures of heaven will far outweigh any sinful pleasure today.

[12:10] So we wait, we're patient and we pursue that final goal knowing that what it offers is far greater than anything else this world will offer today. So it should be an encouragement, an enticement to us to resist temptation, whatever sort of temptation it is in our life and in our world, for the sake of being found on that final day in Christ.

For we know that if we yield to temptation, then we are on a path that is not heading towards the finishing table of the Christian life. Same with the pursuit of worldly wealth.

This world offers or promises much life. And yet by comparison to what God promises on the final day, it's nothing. And yet so often there are Christians who lose the plot or finish the race early because they pursue worldly wealth or pleasure or leisure or some other pursuits.

The majority of Christians who give up the Christian life, I'm sure, do so because of the pursuit of other pleasures or wealths of this life. They've lost their focus on the goal at the end.

They've forgotten that what God promises at the end is far, far greater than anything this world can promise now. And whilst what the world may promise now is instant gratification, what God promises is eternal gratification and satisfaction in him.

[13:34] we're to be prepared to keep our eyes on the goal, on the race that is before us. Not to meander off track in the pursuit of other things, worldly pleasures, sins or temptations or other desires.

But rather to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the goal of our Christian life. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul?

If we keep our eyes fixed on that final goal, then we won't forfeit our soul. We may not gain the whole world, but what God gives us is far, far greater than this world offers.

So be a Christian who is focused on the finishing line. Be a Christian who is focused on the final day of being found righteous in Christ. And shun anything that will prevent us getting to the finishing line.

The importance of the Philippians following this good example of Paul and others is very urgent for them. Paul repeats the injunction to follow his examples. Brothers and sisters in verse 17, join in imitating me and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

[14:52] For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. The Philippians are faced with bad examples. The temptation for them is that they may follow those examples rather than good ones.

The people Paul describes as enemies of the cross of Christ, I do not think are out-and-out pagans, in the sense that there's somebody who says, I'm not a Christian, I'm a pagan, an atheist, or an agnostic, follow my example.

I don't think that's the temptation for the Philippians to follow. But rather the threat seems more subtle. And the Philippians more vulnerable to following a bad example of somebody who claims to be Christian, and yet by their life is an enemy of the cross.

The way Paul describes them is by their living that they actually deny the cross of Christ. Not by their speaking and what they say, but how they live their life. That seems to be the threat for the Philippians.

That they follow somebody who claims to be a Christian, and yet their practices of living show that they are in debt, an enemy of the cross of Christ. A reminder to us that not everybody who claims to be Christian is.

[16:09] It's a reminder to us to be careful of what people say. And that we recognize that those who are Christians not only claim to be so, but live lives which reflect that as well.

Paul has little time for these people. They may claim to be Christians, but as he says at the beginning of verse 18, 19, their end is destruction.

For a charity, like somebody who is an enemy of the cross of Christ, there is little other alternative. Paul describes them in three sharp phrases in verse 19.

It may even be that these three stages, these three descriptions are stages in their enmity of the cross of Christ. God is the belly.

Their glory is in their shape. Their minds are set on earthly things. God is the belly. Maybe they were indulgent, greedy people whose appetites dictate their lives.

[17:22] Maybe it's broader than that. Probably it is. Talking about general sensual pleasures that they pander to. Whether gluttons or gourmets, they are idolaters.

The thing that controls their life is their body. Their feeding or their hampering of their body rather than the things of God. And if their body controls their lives, then they are idolaters.

Their body or belly has become their God. They are serving themselves. They are serving their hedonistic desire for pleasure. They are serving the desire for creature comforts.

For in the end, pandering to oneself is a sin. And it probably takes different forms in different people. And so Paul's term is actually quite broad.

It may be for some people's sexual pleasure that is illicit. It may be the greed of food or laziness or idleness or some desire for physical beauty that is all consumed.

[18:23] All sorts of things. But the threat must be real for Christian people. If that pursuit was not a real threat for the Philippian Christians, then Paul would not warn them.

Well, we're no different, surely, to being vulnerable to such a threat, to being vulnerable to being people whose God is their value. Certainly there's much in our world that encourages us to serve that God.

We're vulnerable to falling into that. But remember that those who walk in such a way are enemies of the cross of Christ. Secondly, they glory in their shame.

Their moral standards are reversed. Possibly this is a second step. Firstly, there is the indulgence. Secondly, there's the justification of it, which leads to an inversion or perversion of moral standards. A confusion between what is right and wrong. What is good and evil. As Isaiah the prophet hundreds of years before said, damning the Israelites because they've lost their moral values.

[19:26] They call good evil and evil good. They're blind to the truth and what is good of God. And that seems to be the description that Paul has in mind here. But as people practice sin and continue in the practice and habit of sin, indulging oneself or pampering oneself or seeking bodily sensual pleasures or whatever, so long as those practices keep on happening and become habitual, then there is a confusion of moral value.

We lose sight of what is right and wrong and we become blind to the truth. That's one of the dangers of indulging and yielding to temptation of any sort. Is that as we yield to it and continue to do so, it becomes a habit in us.

We actually lose sight of what is right and wrong in God's eyes. Paul's warning is that those who walk this way are enemies of the cross of Christ. A third description, perhaps where they end up in a sense, is that their minds are set on earthly things.

Not that their minds just occasionally look at them, but their minds are set on earthly things. Their focus, their direction, their aim, their goal is earthly things.

Their finishing line is not Christ, not the final day, not being found in him, righteous in God's sight, not the upward call of God to heaven and so on, but rather earthly things, preoccupied with the things of this world.

[20:54] For them, this world is all that matters. And again, how vulnerable we are to that sort of thinking, and how vulnerable the Christian church is this century especially, forgetting heaven and

the things of heaven, forgetting the finishing line.

The church becomes all consumed with this world, being relevant to this world, and adopting its values and strategies and so on. And yet, what a danger. As Paul says elsewhere in a parallel to this passage, people who are sinners suppress the truth and the next stage is that their thinking becomes futile, that is, their values are all distorted and confused, and then in the end God gives them up to their base mind and please them.

That's the sort of steps that are going on here in this verse. The rebellion of the mind from God is the basic state of the sinful person. Those whose minds are set on earthly things are enemies of the cross of Christ.

How important it is to see, to have a right mind, to have a right thinking. We'll see Paul's remedy to this next week from Philippians 4. But elsewhere in his letters, time and time again, and not only Paul in his letters, but Jesus as well and the Old Testament prophets as well, make it clear that our minds must be right, that what we think is significant and important in order for our practice and behaviour to be right before God.

So Paul says that we must be transformed in the renewal of our minds, that we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds, that our minds are to be set on the things that are above, on heavenly things. [22 : 28] Because if our minds as Christian people are set on earthly things, we're denying who we really are. For Paul's description of these sinners who are enemies of the cross of Christ is in the end that their minds are set on earthly things.

But he goes on to say in verse 20, our citizenship as Christian people, our citizenship is in heaven. That's where we belong, in heaven. Paul's writing to ancient Philippi in North Greece, far from Rome.

And yet ancient Philippi had the distinction of being a Roman colony, so that its inhabitants were Roman citizens, not something that applied for every city or town in the Roman Empire.

Philippi was a Roman colony. Therefore, the names of its citizens, of Roman citizens in Philippi, were kept on a register in Rome. Paul's using that analogy to the church to whom he writes, but applies it to the Christian life.

That if we are Christians, our citizenship, the register of our names as Christians is kept for us in heaven. Even if the Philippians had never been to Rome, they belong there as Roman citizens.

[23 : 33] But Paul is saying far more importantly than that, our citizenship as Christian people is in heaven. That's where the register of our names is, and that's where our sites are to be set. If we set our sites on earthly things, we're denying our citizenship.

We're denying the fact that we're Christians. But as Christians, we belong in heaven even if we've never yet been there. That's where our home is, not this world. We're strangers, aliens, travelers in this world.

But we belong. Our home, our citizenship, is in heaven. where Christ is, and from where Christ the Savior will come.

The second reading today had the well-known expression, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. And in a sense, Paul is saying something similar to that in this passage.

If our mind is set on earthly things, that's where our heart or mind is. That's where our treasure is. That's where our focus is. As Christian people, our mind or heart is to be set in heaven, in Christ.

[24 : 39] He is our treasure, not something of this world. And Jesus, our treasure, is far more valuable than anything of this world. As we saw last week, Paul is prepared to regard everything as loss for the sake of knowing Christ and being found in him.

Our citizenship is in heaven. And it's from there that we are expecting a Savior, Lord, Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation, but it may be conformed to the body of his glory by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

genuine Christianity lives in the light of that Savior's return from heaven. Sadly, of course, the church in recent decades has often dropped its sights and drooped a flag in its race.

It's looked down instead of up to the finishing line. But meeting Christ on that final day, that is to be our goal as Christian people. That is to be the focus of our life.

That is to be what we're determined about purposefully pursuing that goal of being found in Christ, righteous in God's sight. So look up.

[26 : 00] Fix your gaze on Christ in heaven and who is coming again from there. Look to Jesus. Keep your eye on him. Friday night, I had the great pleasure of being at the MCG.

I must make somewhat muted apologies to Collingwood supporters here. And I was in the Richmond rooms before the game. And I was watching the team warming up. And Robert Walls would stand in a corner and he'd just say a few words. Keep your eye on the ball. Go for the ball.

Be focused. And run, run, run. Keep your eye on the ball. Be focused. And run, run, run. Keep your eye on the ball. Be focused. Run, run, run.

[27 : 06] and for all the excitement of that great victory we're playing a more important game and for all the effectiveness of Robert Walls' motivation St Paul has far greater motivation and for all the joy of a victory over Collingwood it only lasts a week until we play Sydney on Friday but the joy of heavenly victory is everlasting it never ends Jesus is our goal keep your eyes on him fix your focus on him look to him in heaven from where he is coming one day to transform us into his likeness don't lose focus don't be sidetracked don't keep looking in the past don't keep looking at this world but keep your eyes on Jesus don't be tempted by this world's fading pleasures for it's only in keeping our focus on Jesus that we will have solid joys and lasting treasures in heaven forever for to be found in Jesus on that final day is all that matters nothing else in the end is important but that we finish the race found in him not with a righteousness of our own but a righteousness which comes from God through faith in Christ brothers and sisters this one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus for our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we expect a saviour the Lord Jesus Christ amen that we go to God when we ask God in Christ how do we lay in the morning and we ask God how do we lay that difference that Whereas I want to get with all Sermon the Lord amen them in one call negative we ours agree never and so listen that's little and so we have it's not any■■■