

Partners for Eternity

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- [0 : 00] I'd like to keep your Bibles open at that passage, Philippians 3, verse 12, and I'll pray. Father God, we thank you again for the wonder of your word, and your word is so clear. It is so clear to us tonight as to what has been said there, and yet understanding and obeying it, we have got no power to do that without the work of your Spirit in us. And so, Lord, we ask that you would have mercy on us. Help us to heed the warning, to see the encouragement, and to have the determination to continue to press on forward. Lord, for those of us who may be in a state of apathy, Lord, we ask that you would shake us out of that and encourage us to get up and to get on, pressing on to look for you, and we ask it for your sake. Amen.
- This is a radio conversation between the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995.
- [1 : 10] First of all, the Canadians came on the radio. Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid collision. Americans, recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid collision. Canadians, negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid collision. Americans, this is the captain of a U.S. Navy warship, and I say again, divert your course. Canadians, no. I say again, you divert your course. Americans, this is the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course 15 degrees to the north. I say again, that's one five degrees north, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship. There's a bit of a pause on the radio at this point, and the Canadians came in and replied, this is a lighthouse, your call. There are a number of points in the Bible where we get similar kind of warnings needing to change course.
- [2 : 25] And right now, Philippians 3 is one of those instances. There is a clear warning in these verses, one that we need to take heed of. This sermon is the fourth installment in our commitment series for this year, Partners for Life. And the title of this talk is Partners for Eternity. And last night, I decided to change that. Late last night, you don't normally do much changing late at night, but I decided, in fact, I prefer to call this one Partners in Going Hard After God. I think that's a more appropriate title for this talk. From Philippians 3, tonight, I want to show you why we must go hard after God. And I want to encourage you to go hard after God. I want to persuade you that the pursuit of God is not optional even after conversion.
- [3 : 24] And I say that because I take it that the ones that Paul describes in verse 18 as living as the enemies of the cross of Christ are those who have given up pursuing God.

You see, Paul has issued this warning before. And he does it again here, and he does it with tears in verse 19, I think because he knows these people.

And he says, The destiny of the enemy of the cross of Christ is destruction. He could not have used stronger language in issuing this warning.

The destruction he has in mind is eternal destruction. And that is why we must go hard after God. Paul says three things here about the enemy of the cross of Jesus.

Their lives, that is, their lives are characterized by three things. He says there that they have their mind on earthly things. Literally, their mind is set on earthly things.

[4 : 29] At the very center of their life is the world and its thinking and its priorities. They think like the world thinks. Their thinking is not directed by the word of God, the Bible, the scriptures, but by popular culture instead.

And when there's a clash between the Bible and popular influences, the Bible will lose out at every point. Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter when Peter had his mind on earthly things and tried to discourage Jesus from going to the cross?

Do you remember what he said? He turned to his best mate and called him by the name of his worst enemy. Get behind me, Satan. Why?

Because you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. You have your mind set on earthly things. You see, Peter wanted Jesus without a cross.

And a Jesus without a cross is no savior and he's no Lord. The enemy of the cross has their mind set on earthly things. They also glory in their shame.

[5 : 40] The very sins that Jesus died for on the cross are the very things that they delight in. It's the very things that they continue to do and continue to do it in such a way that it doesn't appear to matter.

It doesn't matter because God's going to forgive it anyway. That's what God's in the business of doing. To glory in shame is to keep doing the things that God doesn't want and to think it's okay because Jesus, by the gospel of grace, has forgiven me anyway.

As Titus says, they say that they are Christians, but they deny it by their actions. And so what glorying in shame is, it's a blasé approach to holiness and the mortification of sin.

Of course, these people may well have been able to recite the Ten Commandments, tick the box and say, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I don't obey, and I obey all those things, pretty much in the same way as the rich young ruler.

But what about the acceptable sins amongst us? You see, God, friends, God wants to deal with those acceptable sins as well. The ungodliness, the anxiety, the frustration, the discontentment, the unthankfulness, the pride, the selfishness, the grumbling, the lack of self-control, the impatience, the irritability, the anger, the judgmentalism, the envy, the jealousy, the worldliness, the gossip, the slander, the lying, the embellishment of truth, the greed, the laziness, the gluttony, the apathy, the abuse of power, the manipulation, and the list goes on and on and on.

[7 : 12] Those things which don't seem such a big deal are a big deal to God. And those who glory in their shame don't think those things matter.

When you go hard after God, those stones get turned over and they get dealt with by God. It is painful and raw to allow God to weed around in those closely held sins in our lives because the life of sin is attractive, it is easy, and it feels so good.

And so that's why so many Christians just stop. They get to a point, confession of sin, and then they stop and just get used to a certain pattern of behaviour.

I've come to Christ, I've got salvation, I'm going to get to heaven and that's okay with me. The enemy of God also has their stomach as their God, that is their gut is their God.

They pander to their physical desires and urges. It's what they feel that they want to do is what they do. The words of Jesus, deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me, have been forgotten.

- [8 : 45] They've been forgotten. They have come to Christ, but they don't want to keep denying. That is the enemy of the cross and their destiny is destruction.

Friends, the cross of Christ is where the war on God ended. It is where God dealt with our sin, forgave our sin, forgave our rebellion. It is only through Jesus that we are able to escape a destiny of destruction.

And so why go hard after God in Christ? Because destruction is the destiny of those who don't. But we also get another reason why we should go hard after God in Christ.

It's in verse 20. Have a look at it there in your Bibles. The alternative destination is citizenship of heaven, where the Lord Jesus reigns.

Citizenship is really important. On the most part, for those of us who were born citizens of this country, we just take it for granted.

- [10 : 11] Citizenship is something you just generally take for granted. It's not something that most of us have had to take the time to even bother earning. We just kind of get it when you're born here. That's it. Citizenship is important because it provides protection and care and significance.

If you are a refugee, that is, if you are a citizen of no country, then you don't have anyone to protect you. And refugees generally are fairly nervous.

Citizenship matters when you don't have citizenship. And that was something that mattered for our church earlier this year, when we were fighting for citizenship because life and death were at stake.

Citizenship matters. It's about belonging somewhere and all the privileges that come with it. So, for instance, just over 100 years ago, a Spanish court condemned to death a man for a crime that he had apparently committed.

However, this man was an American citizen and he was British by birth. And so the two ambassadors of those respective countries said that the Spanish authorities had no right to put him to death.

- [11 : 25] The Spanish authorities basically ignored them and so they marched this guy out to be shot, stuck him on the wall. But following out behind the firing squad were the ambassadors of both of those countries.

And as the firing squad raised their guns to shoot this guy, the ambassadors walked out and put the British flag and the American flag. They wrapped this guy in the British and the American flag and then said to the captain of the firing squad, you fire and we will bring both of our empires down upon Spain.

And the guys lowered their guns and... I don't know what that is. That's the firing squad.

Ticked off, decided to shoot someone else. The guys lowered their guns and they walked away.

The guy was wrapped in a couple of bits of cotton, but he may as well have been wearing armour protection because in that moment he was impervious to destruction.

- [12 : 35] and if you are a friend of the cross of Christ then you are impervious to destruction. Trusting Jesus means that your citizenship is in heaven and your destiny is not one of destruction.

Instead of destruction, it's a new body fit for eternity. Did you notice it there? We're not just being changed on the inside, that's what he's doing now, but then our bodies will be completely renewed, bodies that won't need to cry, bodies that won't feel unloved, bodies that won't feel lonely, bodies that won't feel sad, bodies that won't have all those issues, bodies that will never grow tired, bodies that won't break down on you.

That is the privilege of the citizen of heaven. And notice too that what Paul says here, it talks about our citizenship, he doesn't say we will have citizenship in heaven, he says we do have citizen.

It is a present tense. If you are a Christian, then you are already a citizen of heaven. That is your home. That is where you are heading to.

And that is why the citizen of heaven does not just wait, but they eagerly await for their saviour to come. They are bursting to get there.

[14 : 01] And verses 12 to 16 show us what that looks like. And let me say that these verses, verses 12 to 16, explode the false logic that says if Christ has found us, then we don't need to seek him anymore.

Paul's reasoning is in fact the exact opposite. I press on in order to gain Christ because Christ has already gained me.

Verse 12, not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

And all of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

[15 : 14] Paul did not see his conversion to Christ as a cage which held him back, but as a catapult into the pursuit of holiness.

The irresistible grace of Christ overcoming Paul's rebellion did not make Paul passive. He did not sit back and say, well, well, it's all the work of God, I don't do anything, I follow my arms and I just wait for him to come back again.

It actually made him powerful. I take that 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10. By the grace of God, I am who I am and his grace within me was not without effect, because I worked harder than everyone else.

It's not a passive thing, grace, in his mind. Grace is power. And the best commentary on these verses, I think, is in chapter 2, verses 12 to 13.

Work out your salvation in fear and trembling. That's the call. Guys, get on with it, is what he says. Get on with it. Work it out. Work hard at it. Strain towards it.

[16 : 33] Work out your salvation in fear and trembling. Why? Because it is God who is working in you. In calling Christians to go hard after God, Paul in no way undermines salvation by grace alone.

Not even for a little bit. It simply confirms it. Twice in these verses, he affirms it is God who has taken hold of him.

But in the same, the very same verses that he calls us to pursue and to grasp hold of and to continue to move forward, to go hard after God, he calls us, he says that God has already taken hold of him in order to do that.

So, this is what I think he's saying. Our work, that is in the pursuit, the grasping to get hold of Christ, the moving forward, our work is his work for his glory when done in dependence on his sovereign grace.

That's confusing? I'll say it again, just in case. our work is his work for his glory when done independence on his sovereign grace.

[18 : 00] The most fundamental reason why the Christian must go hard after Christ is that Christ is in the Christian moving them to go hard after him.

And it's in this that Paul sets himself up as a model to follow in verse 17. Follow my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern that we gave you. And what was the pattern that Paul gave them?

It's there in verse 10. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow to attain the resurrection from the dead.

What was Paul's pattern of life? I want to know Christ and I want to be like Christ. The whole focus of his life was being made more and more like Jesus until the day he met Jesus face to face.

We saw that back in Philippians 1.21. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is to gain, to get just more of Christ. That is his life.

[19 : 09] And so it is a dodgy logic that insists that if we have found Christ, we need seek him no more. As one writer wrote last century, to have found God and still to pursue him is the soul's paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too easily satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children with a burning heart.

Or as another writer probably put it a little bit more simply than that, was wherever there is true grace, there is a desire for more grace.

I think what he's saying there is that whenever there is true grace, true grace doesn't lead to apathy and laziness in discipleship.

It leads to wanting to strive for more grace. The evidence that you have Christ is that you want more of Christ. Continued indifference to growth in grace is a sign of no grace.

And so friends, that is why we must go hard after God. We must go hard after God because we are citizens of heaven and going hard after God confirms that we are citizens of heaven or alternatively our destiny is destruction and the warning is clear.

[20 : 52] so how then can we learn from Paul? What examples does he give us in these passages? There's clearly a lot more than just the few that are here but I want to say a couple of things, three things.

Firstly, develop holy dissatisfaction. Develop holy dissatisfaction. Paul says here, brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

Paul's pursuit of Christ rises out of a profound dissatisfaction with the way that he is. And I just ponder this question, could it be that there is a connection between how little earnest pursuit of God there is today and how much we are told to think well of ourselves?

I think it's an incredible indictment when potentially the greatest theologian of the last hundred years, well regarded by some anyway, J.O. Packer, has said that modern evangelicalism is virtually absent of communion with God.

Communion with God is almost absent in modern evangelical churches. I think that's amazing. And he's not using the word broadly, he's talking reformed evangelicals when he used that term.

[22 : 26] It is a wonderful thing to have been taken possession of by Christ, but it is a thousand times more wonderful when we realise that we are taken possession of people who remain sinful like you and me.

I find that incredible. The first step in going hard after the holy God then is to develop a holy dissatisfaction with your spiritual life.

And I emphasise your spiritual life. Let me tell you that what comes naturally to us is a dissatisfaction with other people's spiritual life. There are plenty of people that we can point the finger at and say that person needs to pray a little bit clearer, that person can't articulate the faith well enough, that person doesn't even know the faith as far as I'm concerned, that person needs to come to church more, that person needs to give more, that person needs to serve more, and it's so easy to just be dissatisfied with everyone else's spiritual life.

And the call here is to be dissatisfied with your spiritual life. Being able to point out others' lack of pursuit of God doesn't somehow mean that you are.

Being able to point out other people's immaturity doesn't somehow mean that you are mature. What the call here, I believe, is to stand in front of the mirror of the word and recognize that you have not yet arrived, and you won't this side of heaven.

[23 : 52] The hearty admission of our spiritual imperfections is the starting point for the pursuit of God. I want to suggest to you that real humbling guilt is extraordinarily rare.

I think 99% of our bad feelings, about ourselves that is, are rooted in pride. For example, suppose you go to a dinner party and you discover that you are dressed inappropriately for the occasion.

You knock your drink over at the table, the joke you attempt falls flat, you call your host by the wrong name, you tread on the dog's tail and you make the kids cry. How do you feel when you walk out from that?

You feel pretty rotten, you feel embarrassed, you're depressed, you hate yourself, you don't want to show your face. Where do all these depressing, immobilizing, self-denouncing feelings come from?

Is the answer God's offended glory or your offended pride? people who are depressed and immobilized and angry because their behavior has injured the glory of God are very, very, very rare.

[25 : 13] But people who are depressed and immobilized and angry because their behavior has prevented them from having a reputation of being really cool socially, of being intelligent and being competent are very, very, very common.

When I call us to develop a holy dissatisfaction with our spiritual life, I'm asking us to do something which is rare, not common. I'm asking us to feel worse that we possess so little of Christ, that we have such little communion with God.

The first step in going hard after God is to feel bad about the right things. Develop a holy dissatisfaction with your spiritual life, friends. The second step in going hard after God is to forget those things which lie behind, verse 13.

I take this to mean that anything in your or our background which hinders the pursuit of God should be put out of the mind. The point is not never look back.

The point is only look back for the sake of pressing forward. That's what it's about. Never substitute nostalgia for hope.

[26 : 37] Individually and corporately, we must be careful of looking back, my friends. Even memories of successes in the past can make us smug and satisfied in the present.

I remember that I started telling you, I remember one incident in my life where God took me through a really difficult time and he grew me remarkably and in amongst all of that time of, it was hard, it was persecution, and other things that were going on.

God brought me forward and I started to realise after a few years that I used to recount the old stories. I remember a time when. And it dawned on me one day, Steve, that's like ten years ago, man.

What's now? What's the stories now? God's love? Don't be smug about what happened then ten years ago. How's God working in you now?

How are you pressing forward now? memories of successes in the past can make us smug and self-satisfied as individuals and as a church.

[28 : 00] Memories of failure can make us hopeless and paralyzed in our pursuit of God. Never look back like that. We ought to give thanks, humbly give thanks for God's successes amongst us in the past or in our lives in the past.

We must make humble confessions for the failures that have been there but we must always turn to the future and go hard after God. If we keep looking back we become museums.

The final step in going hard after God is that straining forward to what lies ahead. Verse 13 again. What Paul does is he provides us as an illustration of straining forward in 1 Corinthians 9.

He says everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly.

I do not fight like a man beating the air. No I beat my body and I make it my slave so that after I have preached to others I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

[29 : 14] During the marathon in the 1968 Mexico Olympics Tanzanian runner John Stephen Akwari fell early in the race and badly damaged his leg.

He got up, he got a bandage on his leg, got up and he limped the rest of the race and he finally crossed the finishing line an hour and a half after the last person had finished.

And by the time he crossed the finishing line it was kind of getting dark, it was sort of twilight, sun was going down getting a bit dark and a lot of people had gone home, they were virtually shutting down the place for the night anyway and there was a photographer, a reporter there sorry, who was packing up his gear and until he heard this applause with a few people that were left, turns around and the few people left in the stadium are doing, there's a standing ovation and then he noticed what's going on, there's this guy limping around the track and he takes a photo of it, it's actually quite a famous photo, he takes a photo of this guy, it's a bad photo but a famous photo of him in the twilight limping towards the finish line, he runs down to the finish line, jams a microphone in his face and says why didn't you just give up?

You clearly weren't going to win the race, you're badly damaged, you can't even run, why didn't you just give up? You know, like save yourself for another day or something and John's reply was this, you don't understand, my country did not send me 5,000 miles to start a race, they sent me to finish it.

The way to go hard after God is with all the discipline and self denial of an athlete, that's the way to go hard after God, no matter what the cost is, no matter how difficult it is, no matter what obstacles are on the way, there is a finish line up there and my job is to get to that finish line, to press on, to strain forward.

[31 : 18] I doubt that there has ever been a Christian who reached the heights of knowledge and joy and obedience and communion with God without a plan and without discipline and without self-denial.

one of the incredible things that I love to do is to look at biographies of some of the greats in the past and look at their lives and just to see their pattern of lives and man, I tell you what, in one sense they're to be appreciated.

There are some people you just cannot emulate, they're just particularly gifted, but there's something particular about some of their lives which you can emulate and that is their discipline and their focus and their determination.

I mean, Jonathan Edwards, for instance, used to get up at four o'clock every morning and spend the first three hours of the day in study and in prayer.

My goodness, that's incredible. You know, this is the day before, you know, in the middle of winter, in the New England area, he had to stoke the fire first, he had to try and keep himself warm, doing it by candlelight, for goodness sake.

[32 : 45] God does not promise his riches to aimless, apathetic and lazy disciples. Paul did not run aimlessly or beat the air, he lived with spiritual goals in view and controlled his passions for the sake of those goals.

And so I plead with you, friends, to be an athlete, to be a spiritual athlete. Set yourself a goal to know more of the word of God, to grasp more of the will of God, to love more of the wonder of God.

Make a plan of prayer and study and worship and service and go for it with all of your might, with all of your might, God.

Because it is Christ working in you, dragging you heavenward. Heed the warning this evening. Develop a holy dissatisfaction with your spiritual attainments.

Put out of your mind anything in the past which hinders your pursuit of God and strain forward like an athlete. For it is God who is working in you.

[33 : 49] working in you. We do not run in our own strength and all the more therefore we can be assured that going hard after God will bring us to know him deeply and enjoy the sweet, sweet confirmation of our citizenship in heaven.

Let's pray. Father God, your word as we looked at tonight is just so challenging, it is so clear and yet without your spirit we just will not have any desire, without your work in us, any desire to go hard after you.

Lord, our hearts are weak and we are feeble, we are so easily distracted by trivia and irrelevancies, we are so apathetic, we are so comfortable in religion and so rescue us we pray.

Rescue us Father, revive us Lord so that we might go hard after you and enjoy the sweet confirmation of our citizenship in heaven where the Lord Jesus reigns and from where he will come and establish his rule and take us to be with him in heaven.

Father, help us to press on towards the goal and we ask it for your sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 14] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.