

# FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

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## Press On Toward the Goal

### Philippians 3:8-14

<sup>NIV</sup>What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Have you ever considered running a marathon? It's an amazing feat of strength and endurance to run a distance of over 26 miles. During the course of the race, a person's body must be screaming out to stop or at least slow down. Yet, the marathon runner keeps on going all the way until the finish line. There are definitely comparisons between life and running a race, like a marathon. This morning, we see how the apostle Paul uses the picture of a race to describe the proper Christian attitude toward life. With the Spirit's words this morning we are encouraged to ***press on toward the goal***.

Good runners know the right way to run. They know how to maximize their energy output so they can make it the longest distance in the shortest amount of time and do the least amount of damage to their body. The first verses of our text tell us the proper way to run the race of life. In these verses the apostle Paul is speaking from experience. He began the race of life running the wrong way. In the verses before our text, he explains how he used to think was the right way to live. He writes: *"If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."* Paul used to think the race of life could be run all by himself. He thought he was doing everything possible. He thought he had kept all of God's commands. He even thought he was keeping God's commands when he was persecuting the followers of Jesus.

This all changed when he met Jesus one day on the road. In that instant, he was led to see the foolishness of putting his confidence in his good works and what he thought were righteous actions. He realized he was a sinner in need of a Savior. And he rejoiced that he found that Savior in Jesus Christ. He was no longer concerned about keeping the law as a way of

salvation. He knew his only way of salvation was by God's grace through faith in Christ. This is why he wrote in the opening verses of our text, *"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."*

This truth is the first and most important truth for us to understand about running our race of life—it can only be run by God's grace. Many people have the tendency to try to do too much on their own and deny the help that others provide. This can make life difficult. However, when it comes to faith, this fault is fatal. You cannot save yourself. You can try as hard as you want but your best efforts will always come up short, because they are tainted by sin. If you put all your greatest accomplishments together in a trophy case, they would add up to a big pile of rubbish, according to the apostle's words. The only accomplishments we should boast of in this world are the accomplishments of Christ. It is because of the way he ran the race of life in our place and died for our sins that we are able to live at all. Running the race the right way means giving God all the glory and recognizing that it is only by his grace that we run—not our own strength.

A second truth about running a race is that is important to run with a goal in mind. No runner starts a race without knowing where the finish line is. It would be pointless to run a marathon but not know where the route was headed. You could easily get lost along the way and never finish. The apostle Paul ran the race of life with a clearly defined goal. As he writes: *"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,<sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.<sup>12</sup> 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.* Paul summed up his goal with the words: "I want to know Christ." He didn't make the things of this world his major concern. He was only concerned about knowing Christ, following Christ, and finally dying and rising with Christ.

We are to run our race in the same way. Sometimes it is good in life to stop and ask yourself, what is my life's goal? We know the right answer to this question. My life's goal is to die in Christ and go to heaven. Do our lives always show that this is our goal? Or does it sometimes look as though our life's goal is to earn as much money as possible or have as much fun as possible or make as many friends as possible? Now there isn't anything wrong with making money, having fun and enjoying time with friends. But we need to always remember that, in the long run, that is not what life is all about. Life is about knowing Christ and living for him. Those things we do which strengthen our faith in Christ and express our faith in actions—reading the Word, worshipping our Savior, reaching out to others with the love of Christ—those are the things that are truly important. Those are the things that last for eternity.

The third truth about running that we see illustrated in this text is the fact that being a great runner means total commitment to the race. You will never find someone standing on the

winner's podium who gave a half-hearted effort. It will always be the runner who gave his or her all. The apostle Paul puts this truth into the context of his Christian life with these words: "*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" The apostle speaks of putting every ounce of his energy towards the goal of winning the prize of eternal life. The way his does this is by always moving forward and not spending his time dwelling on the past.

If you go to a middle school track meet, you will see many athletes make the common mistake of looking back while they are running in a race. They want to see who is behind them. The problem is, it is very difficult to run forward at full speed while you are looking backward. The same is true with the race of life. It does not help for you to dwell on the past. Sometimes you can dwell too much on your past failures. You can't escape the guilt and shame that are associated with sins you have committed. This is when you need to remember that God has forgiven (and forgotten) those sins through Jesus Christ. By God's grace, you can forget them as well. The other way that you can hurt yourself by dwelling on the past is to keep looking at past accomplishments. You might be tempted to point to the good things you have done and think you can take some time off from the difficult process of living for the Lord. The Christian life is not like that. There is always more we can do and we continue to strive for greater service to the Lord. Each day begins with this thought: "Whatever has happened in the past is behind me. Today is I new day. Today I will live for the Lord."

That is the attitude we take with us as we continue to struggle and strive in the race of life. We take it with us all the way to the grave. That is when our race is finished. That is when we receive the prize. It is not a prize that we have earned by the way we ran our race. It is prize that is given to us out of God's grace. This prize is an eternity of joy in our Savior's presence. Knowing that is waiting for us at the finish line gives us all the motivation we need to follow the apostle's example and press on toward the goal. **Amen.**

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Sermon No. 259  
March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010  
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