

7/20/2011 TOP TEACHINGS OF PAUL: Bonus - "Forward, Not Backward"

Key Scripture: Philippians 3:7-14

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What are some of the things you value most?

We all have certain possessions that are heirlooms, or were given to us by a parent or grand-parent. We all prize certain things in our lives because of the sentimental value we have attached to them. Sometimes hand-me-downs are actually worth something, like your grandfather's coin collection, your father's original baseball cards, or your grandmother's best recipes or her antique jewelry. There are a lot of things from the past which we appreciate and value.

We also have certain accomplishments that we are proud of. Having earned a degree, perhaps a Masters or even a doctorate can be something we are particularly proud of. Perhaps something we did or accomplished at work is really important to us, or the recognitions that have come as a result of hard work. If you were ever inducted into a hall of fame for example, or nominated for a significant award, that would be a seriously important accomplishment. And those trophies or plaques we hang on the wall, or those crystal awards we place on our desk or on the bookshelf behind our desk; are all things that recognize and represent a great body of our work.

It is a natural part of life to look back and to remember the past. The fond memories of our childhood or young adulthood, the accomplishments of a long career, or the accumulation of possessions and assets that makes us feel like we did something right – can really give us an ego boost, and make us feel pretty good about ourselves. When we can look back with joy and pride at things we have done in life that is often a very good thing.

On the other hand, we sometimes look back and are haunted by the mistakes we have made as well. The sins we committed, the people we hurt, the poor choices we made, the things we regret doing; can all truly trouble us, and they have the affect of making us feel bad about ourselves. Those memories can make life painful and disappointing.

Paul struggled with some of these same feelings too. We can tell by how he described his early childhood and education that at one time he was extremely proud of his privileged life and of all his accomplishments. He had much in which he could take pride. After all he was born into a solidly Jewish family. His father was a wealthy merchant, and because he was born in Tarsus, he was granted full Roman Citizenship. He was circumcised on the eighth day according to Jewish custom. He went to Hebrew school and excelled. He was given the fantastic opportunity as a student, to sit at the feet of one of the greatest teachers of Israel, Gamaliel. He became a member of the party of the Pharisees, and was well on his way to perhaps becoming the High Priest. He began his attack on the Christians because he so earnestly desired to keep the Jewish faith pure, and he wanted to prove his loyalty, faithfulness, and his zeal. All of this was once a source of great pride in him. At the writing of his letter to the Philippians, he had come to realize that all of those things were of very little value compared to the great joy he had of being saved by Christ.

The Letter to the Philippians is one of his last congregational letters, so he is at an age where he can look back and reflect some on his very distinguished ministry in the name of Christ. However, he looks forward to what God has in mind for his life and he looks back on the insignificance of his previous values, and declares that he counted it all as rubbish, as trash, or – as it is written in one translation, he

viewed his previous accomplishments as “dung” – of no value at all. His formerly important Jewish credentials, and his presently important Christian ministry accomplishments are all still rubbish, compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ and of having his life made worthwhile by the knowledge of God’s love for him through Jesus.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 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 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.

What is behind is behind. What is done is done. Whether exceedingly good, or exceedingly bad, or every place in between – the only thing we should focus on and value is what is ahead. What is God calling us to do next? What is God asking us to do now? What is the work that God has set before us – that’s what’s important right now. Pressing forward, not resting on our laurels, nor beating ourselves up for our mistakes, pressing forward is what God calls us to do. Paul wrote, **One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

The prize is not the accolades of our peers. The prize is not getting our name on a plaque or on the wall at the office. The prize we truly should strive for is to hear the voice of God saying, “Well done, you good and faithful servant. Everything I asked of you, you tried to do, and you accomplished many good things. Thank you. Come into the celebration of your Father in heaven.”

So how do we let go of the past? We do so by valuing the future more. Courtney turned 16 last summer, but because of her busy schedule and her late August birthday, she did not get to take Driver’s Education till this past spring. She had been dreaming since she was 13 or 14 of having a pick-up truck one day when she got her license, and she was saving up for it. Dawn’s father had died a few years ago, and his small Ford Ranger pick-up was just sitting parked in their yard most of the time. So in a conversation with her mother, Dawn mentioned that Courtney was saving for a pick up truck, and her mother offered to Courtney her grandfather’s Ranger.

When Dawn told Courtney the news she was ecstatic. She finally would be able to have a pick up truck, and one that had sentimental value for her because she used to ride with her grandfather to all kinds of places, when she would visit them as a child. We brought it home last Labor Day weekend. The first thing we did was wash the truck, compound the paint to brighten it, and then put on a good coat of Turtle Wax. I used it some, and Courtney practiced driving in it but mostly it was just waiting for her to get her license.

In May, Courtney got her license. She and that truck became best friends and she drove it wherever she needed to go. Now the truck was 15 years old, and it had sat idle for nearly three years. So we weren’t surprised when it experienced a few hiccups. We poured quite a bit of money into it to keep it running. We used to kid, that it was one of the most expensive free trucks we’d ever seen. Recently, it broke down again, and we began to worry that the truck would leave her stranded somewhere when she was out and about. She often works at night at the Blue Crabs stadium and we worried about her breaking down on a lonely road. We finally had to discuss getting her a more reliable vehicle. Courtney was sad at first, thinking about giving up her first vehicle, her grandfather’s truck. But once we started

car shopping and she got to test drive one that she really loved, and when it looked as though we might be able to afford it, she got all excited about her new car. It is easy to let go of the past that is not as good, when we see a future that is much better.

That is Paul's point exactly. All the pride, all the boasting, all the joy of the past, can be more easily let go, when we see the surpassing value of what is to come. And what is to come is a partnership with God in which God helps us to be and become far more than we are today. It is a surpassing value to know that our sins are forgiven, our past won't hold us back, and that God has great blessings in store for us. Then like Paul, we can strain forward, forgetting the past and striving toward the goal of winning the prize that God is holding for us to claim.

Whatever credentials we may think we have; whatever accomplishments we think are important; whatever ego investment we have in who we are today cannot compare with the great plans and blessings that God has waiting for us in the future, if we, like Paul, will strain forward and not look back. Paul's statement and attitude is true, even if you think you are old, and you think there is less time ahead, than there is behind you. Did you know that Grandma Moses, that great American painter, didn't even pick up a paintbrush till she was 80 years old.

A future with God, doing his will is always better than our past no matter how good it was. This is true of all the good things we did, and all the bad things we did. The past is gone. It is over. The bad is forgiven and the good is of little credit to us. What is truly more valuable is the new life, the new possibilities, and the new relationship we can have with God, if we will embrace it, and run toward it. God has great plans for you beginning today. So forget what is behind and strain forward toward what is ahead, press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus. Amen.