

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
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(Guest Commentary during August by
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Living into the Future

Philippians 3:1b – 4:1

Key verse: 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 calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14)

“I press on.” What a powerful statement! Like most of us Paul had many concerns clamoring for his attention, but he was able to focus entirely on his mission – to make Christ known! Because he understood the purpose of his life, he could pour all of his energy into his mission. Sharing Christ was the “one thing” he had to do so every day he “pressed on” to accomplish his goal.

Most of us can work more effectively when we narrow our focus and put first things first. But that is more easily said than done. Pride causes us to think that we can do many things so we are often “spread too thin.” The result is frustration with ourselves and with others; we wind up exhausted and unable to do any task with excellence.

Putting first things first is never easy. But it is possible. And it is necessary if we are to live well. Most of us need to stop the merry-go-round, look in the mirror, and take an honest look at how we are living. Are the choices we are making every day helping us to make the most of our brief span of life? Once we decide what really matters, then it is a matter of doing what Paul did – press on doing the one thing that helps us honor Christ!

It helps me to get off in a quiet place where I can meditate and pray. Often I take a note pad and ask the Spirit to help me “center down” in Him, to become quiet in my soul so I can think clearly. Then I ask for help, divine assistance, to write down the goals I want to accomplish. I begin with “goals for this year,” then “goals for this month,” and finally “goals for today.” Then I ask myself, what is the best way to use my time today? What “blocks of time” can I devote to the goals that matter the most? Once I have this sense of direction, I am less likely to be distracted by the normal “interruptions” that happen every day. I know where I am going and I try fiercely to stay on the course I believe the Spirit has helped me embrace. We have heard it said that time is money, but more importantly time is limited. We must use it wisely every day for “the night is coming when no man can work.”

But we must also be careful not to “run over people” in pursuing our goals. Early on I discovered that to be one of my unconscious faults. I learned it painfully when an exasperated associate said to my face, “Walter, you are like a bull dozer trying to tear down a mountain of work every day and in doing so you run over and hurt the people around you. You must be trying to prove to your daddy or to God that you are a hard worker. You seem like a nice person but you are seldom fun to work with.” His stinging words forced me to seek the Lord’s help in the way I went about doing “the Lord’s work.” I began to be more intentional in observing the needs of others. In time I developed a new sensitivity to the cries of hurting people who seldom come to us “by appointment” but reach out to us in subtle ways in the ordinary circumstances of daily life.

Finding the grace to handle interruptions is a necessity for followers of Jesus. The Gospels describe our Lord as being always ready to respond compassionately to people who interrupted his day with their needs and requests. Jesus had no appointment book though occasionally he did meet people, like Nicodemus, at designated times. As Jesus walked about on the dusty roads of Galilee, he was always “full of pity” for the poor, the halt, the blind, anyone who needed his love and his healing touch. As his disciples we should not presume that all around us are poor people who need our help, but all around us are people who need the help of Jesus. It is our business to love them and “bring them to Jesus,” giving them hope that he can do for them what we cannot. A man desperate for help said to me, “I am addicted to cocaine; can you help me?” I said, “No, but I know someone who can help you and his name is Jesus.” I assured him that the Lord loved him and wanted to break the chains that bound him. The Lord helped me to guide him to a ministry where he did find help and victory over drug use.

As we focus intently on what we can and should do to serve our Lord, we should squeeze all the wisdom we can from these words of Paul: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on....” None of us can grow in grace until we learn to “forget what lies behind.” The past can be like a chain; the devil can chain us to depression and stagnation with guilt about our past. Only Jesus can break these chains!

A woman struggling with hatred for her father came to me for counseling. She shared the bitter story of how she had been sexually abused by her father when she was a young girl. Her story broke my heart. She wanted to know why, if God loved her, he did not stop her father from abusing her.

My best answers did not bring her peace. But I began to realize that the real problem was her continuing hatred for her father. After months of counseling a breakthrough finally came. Though it was terribly difficult to do, she finally agreed to forgive her father for his despicable abuse.

I asked if she would now be willing to go to him and tell him that she had forgiven him. Her reply stunned me. “Why,” she said, “he has been dead for 20 years.” For more than 40 years her hatred had “chained” her to her father. But now the chain was broken! She was free at last and to my great joy she became a new and more beautiful person.

Her deliverance can be described best by the popular new verse now sung with the beloved song “Amazing Grace:”

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God My Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

If there are chains binding you to your past, let me urge you to ask Jesus to set you free. He delights to help us “forget what lies behind” so that having been set free, we can press on to “what lies ahead.” Free from our past we can focus on knowing Christ, serving Christ, and sharing Christ with others who need deliverance from their chains. As we do we can expect to experience the fullness of joy that Paul found in living his life for Jesus.