

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

Philippians 3:7-14

I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: **Forgetting the past and looking forward** to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ **I press on** to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

¹⁵ *Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you.*

In this passage Paul describes the attitude or perspective that mature Christians should have about the past, the present and the future. The NIV translates verse 15 this way:

"All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things."

What is this view or perspective that Paul had, and which God wants us to have, towards the past, present and future?

Paul said he was ***Forgetting the past, looking forward to what lies ahead in the future, and pressing on in the present.***

Let me begin with a premise I hope we can all agree with. God has a plan and purpose for everyone that becomes a child of God by faith in Christ. Paul

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

refers twice in vs. 12-14 to the reality that there is a “goal” to his life. Paul is going somewhere, he has a destiny he is pursuing. The wrong attitude towards the past, present, and future will mess you up, but the right attitude will set you up. An unhealthy attitude will prevent you, but a healthy attitude will propel you.

Paul’s words in this passage would have created in the minds of his recipients the imagery of an Olympic runner who needs to be forward focused. In this series I am going to employ the imagery of a race car driver rather than a runner, because a runner does not look back at all but a race car driver needs to use both his windshield and his rearview mirror.

Today we are going to begin by looking at what we can learn from this passage, as well as from Paul’s other NT letters, in order to gain a proper perspective on the past. I want to frame this discussion under the subject heading, “The Proper Use of Your Rearview Mirror”. If you drive a car I am sure you use your rearview mirror. The question is, “Do you use it properly?” Do you look at, or think about, your past in a manner that is constructive or destructive?

First of all, it is important to notice that although Paul says he is “forgetting the past” it is clear he does not mean that he does not think about the past at all. In fact, in verses 4-12 Paul engages in some vital reflection on his past.

Look at verse 7 where we began reading:

Paul wrote, “I once thought these things were valuable.” What “things” is he referring to? He described them in verses 5-6:

“I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.”

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

Paul encouraged healthy reflection on the past throughout his letters and he does so here. He reflected on how everything he thought was so valuable in his past he has now come to recognize as worthless compared to what he has gained in Christ.

He was well-educated, well-respected, and as a result possessed tremendous self-confidence along with a ton of self-righteousness. But now his eyes have been opened to the fact that, while his peers thought he was righteous, and he thought he was righteous, the reality was he was a blasphemer and a persecutor of God's people!

He recalled his past status as a prominent Jewish leader who flawlessly followed the Mosaic law in order to remind himself and his audience of the fact that a privileged status of being one of God's children does not come from human effort but from Christ. His righteousness did not come from his strict adherence to the law but from being united to Christ Jesus...the perfect righteous One!

A. The Proper Use of Your Rearview Mirror

1. Use it to Occasionally Look Back!

We need to remember and recall what God has done for us, in us, and through us. In 1 Timothy Paul reflects on his past as a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent aggressor. In 1 Corinthians 6 he reminds the Christians at Corinth that some of them had been involved in fornication, adultery, homosexuality, drunkenness, thievery, and fraud. He reminds them that Jesus had forgiven and freed them from all of that so why would they want to go back to it.

In the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians he reminds his readers of their generosity to him, thanking them for their willingness to give even though they were quite poor. Why do we need to remember and recall what God has done for us, in us, and through us?

SO THAT WE WILL REMAIN...

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

- a) Thankful – Why did he remind himself and others of their past sins? To beat himself and them up over the past? No! He reminds them for the sole purpose of magnifying God's grace in order to keep them in a state of gratitude for what God had done for them. I don't know if there is a more important habit you can develop than the habit of giving thanks. I don't think there is a more important attitude to cultivate than an attitude of gratitude.
- b) Hopeful – Why did he remind the Christians at the church in Philippi of their generosity? In order to encourage them that God would be faithful to them and reward their faithfulness. The scripture is full of reminders of God's past faithfulness in order to build our trust in His future faithfulness. Remembering what God has done in us and through us in the past will encourage us to serve with a confidence that our service is not in vain!

We also need to occasionally look back at what we have done; both at what we have done wrong as well as what we have done right, SO THAT WE...

- a) Will NOT repeat our sins & mistakes – In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul reminds his readers of the failures of the Israelites in the wilderness. Their grumbling and complaining, their immorality and idolatry. Twice he states that the Corinthians were to let the Israelites failure be an example to them so that they would not repeat the same mistake.
- b) Will repeat what you have done right. It is also helpful to remember when you did obey or follow God's leading in some area and the blessing that you received in order to encourage you to keep on the right track. Affirming righteous conduct motivates more of the same. Whatever you reward you get more of.

SO REMEMBER, USE YOUR REARVIEW MIRROR TO LOOK BACK, BUT

2. Don't Focus on It.

When Paul wrote that he was forgetting what was behind he was talking about the fact that he wasn't allowing himself to dwell in the past. There is a difference between reflecting on the past in order to stay grateful, hopeful,

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

and encouraged and fixating on the past. It is not remembering the past, but dwelling on the past that is destructive.

a) It is destructive to focus on our past failures. Some people dwell on their past failures, whether they were mistakes or sins, and they are trapped by guilt that weighs them down emotionally and physically. We must accept Christ's forgiveness. To not do so is to suggest that you are more just and righteous than God is! Some accept God's forgiveness but let shame keep them isolated from God's people.

When I was preparing for the ministry at VFCC I heard that a young man that I grew up with in church had been convicted of burglary and incarcerated. I get his information and began corresponding with him. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that his heart had become softened to God as a result of his failure. While in prison he recommitted his life to Christ. After I graduated from VFCC, I returned to my home church and began my ministry as the youth pastor. Shortly after I returned, Rob was released and returned home. I encouraged him to reconnect with our church family so he could receive the encouragement, support and accountability that every Christian needs in order to grow, and to my disappointment he declined. The obstacle that prevented him was his shame; his discomfort about what others would think and say about him. Although I tried to convince him that he would be accepted by the church despite his past. Unfortunatley, he wasn't convinced.

Some accept that they are forgiven but think that their past disqualifies them from being able to serve or lead. They become trapped by thoughts such as, "How can God use me to lead others after what I have done?" "Nobody wants to hear the opinion of an ex-con." Many people, when they fail, don't see their failure as something they DID, but as something they ARE! We need to take ownership for past decisions, without allowing them to define us. Don't let a decision you made become the definition of who you are. We need to be able to say, "I failed" without interpreting that truth to mean "I am a failure".

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

4/8/18 – Pastor Randy

If you are one of those who doubts that you can be renewed to a place of productivity and a position of godly influence because of your past consider this: Noah was a drunk... Abraham lied... Jacob was a deceiver... Moses had a stuttering problem... Gideon was a coward... Rahab was a prostitute David was an adulterer and a murderer... Elijah was suicidal... Jonah was a rebel... Mary Magdalene was demon-possessed... Zaccheus was a thief... Peter denied Christ... Paul was a blasphemer, and violent-aggressor... And Lazarus was dead!! Jesus has the power to remove the labels that others have placed on you So tell me again why your past is too much for God to overcome?

b) It is also destructive to focus on your past victories.

When we speak about putting the past behind us, we normally think exclusively in terms of past failures, but we need to realize that some people are hindered by dwelling on past successes. They are so enamored with the past that they want to stay there. They can't move forward because they don't want to move forward. They would rather sit around and talk about the "good old days". *I have lived long enough now to discover that most of what people say about the "good old days" never even happened!* They have idealized it in such a way as to conveniently forget the negative aspects of the past. Some people act as if they talk about the good old days long enough they can relive them. The truth is...they ain't coming back. Rick Pitino, former coach of the Celtics scolded the fans to reporters saying Larry Bird, KM, RP are not walking through that door.

Here is the reality. We have to redeem the time for the days are evil. We can celebrate victories, but we must keep our celebration short so we can get back to business doing God's will. The moment you believe that your best days are behind you, is the moment they are. If you are convinced that you will never experience God's presence in your life as you did 10 years ago, you have pretty much assured that you won't.

Forward Focused – The Proper Use of the Rearview Mirror

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