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“Intentionality”

Sermon Series: “Getting Past the Past,” No. 1

September 7, 2025

Philippians 3:4b-16

4b If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 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; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 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 on the basis of faith. 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, 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, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

15 All of us, then, 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. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

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I'd invite you to turn back with me, if you like, to the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church...chapter 3. Philippians 3...the passage that was read for us.

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If I hold this like this, or like this...you know what this is; this is a rear-view mirror.

[acts out looking in rear-view mirror]

The earliest vehicles...the earliest cars didn't have these. To see behind you, you had to actually turn your head, look over your shoulder, and look backward.

These first appeared in cars in the nineteen teens, but not normal cars, not streetcars. Race car drivers put them in their race cars...so they could more easily keep an eye on their competition.

It wasn't until the 1930s that car manufacturers began installing them on normal, street cars; and they ***weren't required***...federal law didn't ***require*** rear-view mirrors until 1976.

They also started out ***tiny***...***way*** smaller than this...and were only on the ***inside*** of the car – mounted on the top of the dash. Then they began hanging them inside from the roof. Then they started putting them ***outside***...but ***only*** on the ***driver's*** side.

***Now***, of course, they're typically larger...and they're on the windshield inside ***and*** on ***both*** sides ***outside***...and they have power controls. Some even defrost themselves and fold in when the car is parked.

But of course even ***beyond mirrors***, cars now have ***cameras*** and ***screens***. Some allow you to see ***all around you***. Most, though, are really there so you can see...so you can know what's...***behind*** you.

For driving safely...for backing up...and for noticing the police car that's pulling you over for speeding, it's a good thing to ***keep an eye on what's behind you***.

[people chuckle]

When you're driving, it's important to keep an eye on what's behind you.

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The same is ***not necessarily true***, though, for life in general...and for the life of a Christian in particular.

It's ***not*** always important to keep an eye on what's behind us.

Now, to remember good things...good things that God has done...yes, that's important.

In fact, remembering God's past faithfulness and provision is often what gives us the courage to move ***forward***, especially in difficult times.

But...it is not good or wise or helpful to ***dwell on*** our pasts...***neither*** our ***good*** days ***nor*** our ***bad*** days...our ***victories*** or our ***defeats***. We ***can't*** dwell on ***those and*** move ***ahead*** in life and faith.

No one can live successfully in the past and the present at the same time...and we sure can't live in the past and strive for the future at the same time.

You see, the danger of dwelling on the past is letting it's good or bad consume us...and that is pointless, because there is no way to put ourselves in reverse and go backward.

Now, some people try to do that. Because they want to go back to better days, some people try go backward...with hair implants and Botox injections and a trophy spouse...they try to put themselves in reverse and go backward to what they think was a better time and life.

We heard about that whole effort from some world leaders this past week, didn't we? The leaders of China and North Korea and Russia were having a talk that got picked up on a microphone they didn't know was on, and they were talking about their hope that, with ongoing organ transplants, people could live for 150 years.

Perpetual youth. I wonder how many of their own people those three are experimenting on with that?

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Of course I'm all for living good, healthy lives...for as long as we can live them; but the fact is, no matter how much we build our muscles and tighten our wrinkles and color our hair and wear clothes suitable for an 18 year old, ***we just can't go backward.*** We can't do it.

And we really shouldn't try.

The fact is, young people make fun of old people who are desperately trying to look young. We lose the respect of others when we try to be who we're not.

On top of that, it's a colossal waste of time and money...to try to do what cannot be done. The hungry of our world could probably be fed several times over with the money ***just Americans waste*** trying to go ***backward.***

There are several other reasons I could mention, but for followers of Jesus, there's an ***even better reason*** why we shouldn't be always looking in the rear-view mirror...and that is, looking backward keeps us from doing what we really ***ought*** to be doing...what God ***calls*** His people to do, and ***that*** is...to move ***forward.***

God calls His people, not to dwell on either the good or the bad days of the past...since that doesn't do any good for any one for today; God calls His people to move ***forward.***...to live ***today*** for Him and for others.

The apostle Paul figured this out, and He talks about that here in Philippians 3. He gives us here some immensely practical advice.

Some people think Paul is only about complicated theological principles, but that's not so.

Paul knows that one of our enemies' most powerful tools is to get us to dwell on our past...to always be looking back...wishing things ***now*** were like they ***used to be...******or...***wishing we could go back and ***change*** something...***fix*** something that, maybe, we ***did*** or ***didn't do.***

Some people wind up dwelling...thinking all the time about those sorts of past things, and that is just an utter waste of time.

All the ***good*** that Paul did ***himself*** in days past – there's no point in dwelling on that because that makes us think better of ourselves than we need to. The reality is, anything good we did comes from the Lord.

***And*** all the ***bad*** stuff...***misguided*** stuff that Paul, himself, did...there's no point in dwelling on ***that*** because that falsely minimizes God's ability to ***forgive*** and ***restore*** and ***redeem.***

Neither our good nor bad stuff of the past defines us as followers of Jesus. Paul understood that, and he had both good and bad in his life, didn't he?

As a Pharisee, Paul **was, genuinely,** as **serious** about God as a person could be; but **also...**remember...Paul relentlessly **persecuted Christians...**going as far as giving his approval to the stoning of Stephen.<sup>1</sup>

But in verse 8...he writes, ***“I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage...”***

All the good in my past...all the bad in my past...it's all garbage.

Why?

He says, ***“so that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”***

He expands that in verse 10...Paul says, ***“I want to know Christ...I want to know His power and His sufferings, in order to become like Him in...His death and...His resurrection.”***

You see, Paul understood that dwelling on our past keeps our eyes and attention on **us...**the **good** or the **bad...**of **us**.

And **we** are not where our eyes and attention ought to be.

Our eyes and attention need to be on **Jesus...**and on what following Him accomplishes; but shifting our attention to Jesus does take effort on our part.

Paul says there in verse 13, ***“This one thing I do.”***

You see, it doesn't just naturally happen. Even when we come to Jesus, we're still tempted to pay all this attention to us...the fall changed our wiring so that we default to looking at ourselves, paying attention to ourselves, being preoccupied, actually, with ourselves...who we are, what we've done, how others see us...and on and on.

Paul says that, in order to put our attention and eyes on Jesus, we have to (verse 13), ***“forget what is behind.”***

Forget what is behind.

Forget the good. Forget the bad.

Now that doesn't mean erasing our memories.

What he means is...not dwelling on the past...not living in the past...not wishing to go back to the past to either fix what we broke...**or...**to live what we might think is a better time of life.

Don't dwell in the past.

***“Forget what is behind,”*** Paul says, ***“and then strain toward what is ahead. Press on!”***

That is how we move forward in faith, as God wants us to, and to, as Paul says there in verse 14, ***“win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”***

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¹ Acts 7-8

Paul's couching our journey in Jesus here in terms of a race.

In a race, you don't get anywhere looking backward.

Sure, at times you ran well, and that's great. Other times, you didn't – you stumbled...you tripped – but you regained your footing and ran on.

Regardless though...what's past is past.

No runner, mid-race, gives any effort to contemplating the ground they've already covered. You won't run well in the moment if you do that...and...you won't finish strong...you won't finish well.

No, as you run, you look ahead.

And more than that, in fact.

The word there in verse 13 is closer to "strain ahead." This is a moving ahead with intensity and intentionality...with all your energy, with all you've got, you're using every muscle you have to move ahead...keeping your eyes on the future...on the finish line.

You see, people who do that aren't always looking, either longingly or regretfully, over their shoulders...in their rear-view mirrors. [again, focuses attention with mirror] They have other, better priorities.

They know the good they've done is only by God's grace.

They know the bad they've done has been forgiven by the blood of Jesus.

What's past is past...and now...they have more important things to do.

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Paul would say in verse 15, "***No mature runner***" gives any effort to contemplating the ground they've already covered.

To finish well, we have to get over that...get past it.

***Forget*** where we've ***been***; that's not what matters now.

What matters ***now*** is what's to ***come***.

What matters ***now*** is where we're ***going***.

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As we come to the Lord's Table today, I wonder...do you need to be intentional about ditching some rear-view mirror in your life?

Is God's Spirit pointing out some place in your past that is hanging you up...that your mirror always seems to focus on?

It may be some ***good*** thing...even some ***great*** thing you've done...but that you're still seeking glory for?

It may be some ***bad*** thing...some ***sinful*** thing you did...that you can't forgive yourself for...or that you can't believe God either ***will*** or ***has*** forgiven you for?

You see, either way, you're not looking at Jesus today.

Either way, you've got your mirror out and...you're looking at *yourself*. You're *hung up* on *you and your past*.

You can't win a race that way.

Were he here today, the Apostle Paul would say, "You need to get past your past. You need to either *give God the glory He's due*, or *accept His forgiveness...*or *maybe both...*and then...*refocus your attention...*get your eyes off *yourself* and look *ahead...**focus* on *Jesus*."

Doing that takes intentionality, but the Lord will help us; His Spirit will give us the power we need to do it, if we'll but ask.

If you need to get past the past in some way...so you can focus clearly on Jesus and what's to come, God's calling you to do that...even here around His table...because He's the reason for our good. He's the one who forgives.

Let's put our focus on Him instead of our pasts, because He's where our future is.

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Prayer:

Holy Spirit, would you, right here and now, bring to mind anything in our lives...any of our lives, my life...that is slowing our pace...anything that is compromising our race...anything that is putting our attention on ourselves and not on Jesus?

Something we've done...maybe something we've not done...something about a past relationship, a memory, some failure or success...anything that is distracting us from having a single-minded focus on Your upward call in Jesus. Holy Spirit, point it out to us here and now.

If there's something we need to act on...something we need to deal with, show us what that is. Help us to be obedient to you, and then to forget it and move forward...so we can live in freedom and so we can do whatever it is You call us to do with Your peace and power within us and upon us.

Lork, we open ourselves to Your voice. Tell us what you will about this we pray, and take us past whatever about our past holds us there. We ask in Your name, Jesus. Amen

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Communion

Closing Song: "Higher Ground"

Closing Word and Benediction:

Please – don't let the enemy use this tool on you. [again displays rear-view mirror]

He's good at using these to keep us in the past – dwelling there...living there.

Jesus, though, calls us *forward*. His is this *liberating* call...an offer of *forgiveness* and an invitation to the *future*...a future with *Him*, no matter our past.

So, let's dismiss every distraction that turns us toward ourselves.

Let's stop dwelling on ground we've already covered.

Let go of your past, grab hold of Jesus and walk forward with Him. That is what wins the race...the prize of eternal life.

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Thanks for coming to worship this morning. The Lord bless and keep you today. Amen

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