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Running the Race
Philippians 3:12-20

I encourage you to sit back and **hear** the words of Paul in Philippians 3:12-20, much as the original congregation might have heard this letter read aloud to them at the church in Philippi.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.

16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...

Last week we talked about **who we are**,
beyond where we **come** from, or what we have **accomplished**,
or what we **own** or even our **families**...

And what **actually defines us**?

Is it all of those exterior things ...or

Is it our **relationship with Jesus Christ**?

Today Paul continues by talking about **life as a race**,
with a goal, a prize—and that **prize is Jesus Christ**.

I often *feel like life is a race*...what about you?
 And when I think of life that way, well it can make me pretty tired.
 Life seems to be a race that I'm not anywhere close to finishing,
 or winning any prizes, you know?

So, what does Paul really *mean*?

Well, Paul had been running *a different race*,
 as we heard last week in the first part of chapter 3.
 He had been running a race to be the best Jewish leader, a successful Pharisee.
 And he recounts his *resume* of accomplishments.
 His goal was to *win the race* of being right, of being holy,
 of being a success in the religious establishment.
 He was running a race, and keeping *score* of everything he accomplished.
 In that race, he was *counting every single step*.

Do we find *ourselves* doing the same thing?
 Do we ever find ourselves running this race of life, and keeping score?
 Of what we've done right? And wrong?
 Do we run our race, by counting every single step?

Paul did, until Jesus found him on the road to *Damascus*,
 blinding him with that light,
 and sending him in a *new direction*—as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus!
 Paul realized that he had been running for the wrong prize,
 of being right, holy, the best,
 and he realized he had been running in the wrong direction.

Paul thought that *following every letter* of God's law
 was the right way to live.
 And Jesus came along, and *freed him*.
 Jesus showed him real life is about a *relationship* with Him, not just laws.
 Jesus showed him how He is the *fulfillment* of God's laws.

Knowing Jesus is different than just following the law.
 Before he knew Jesus, Paul was running,
 and doing a pretty good job of it according to a lot of people.
 But he was actually headed in the *wrong direction*.
 Jesus turned him around.

Ever found *yourself running in the wrong direction*,
even though it feels right?

It's kind of like the story of Minnesota Vikings *Jim Marshall*,
in a 1964 NFL game against San Francisco,
when he took off running to the end zone, as fast as he could go,
with dreams of a touchdown.

He heard the crowd roaring, and saw his teammates waving their arms on the
sidelines. He cruised down, celebrated his touchdown,
when a San Francisco player came and gave him a hug!
And that's when he realized it.

He had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored points for the other team!
When they replay that moment, you can hear the announcer yelling,
Marshall is running the wrong way!
Sadly, the only person who didn't realize it, was Jim Marshall.

Or maybe we're like the man *driving down the highway* whose wife called
him on his cellphone to tell him to watch out, because she had heard on the
news that there was a crazy person driving the *wrong way* down that
highway. And the man replied, "You're not kidding, honey -- there's not just
one crazy person going the wrong way; I can see lots of them!" From a sermon by
Jeremy Troxler. Oct. 2, 2011, in Duke University Chapel.

Maybe we're like *Matt Emmons*, who was one shot away from claiming the
gold in the 2004 Olympic 50-meter three-position rifle competition.
He didn't even need a bull's-eye to win.
His final shot merely needed to be on target.

Normally, the shot he made would have received a score of 8.1,
more than enough for a gold medal.
But in what was described as "an extremely rare mistake in elite competition,"
Emmons fired at the wrong target.
Standing in lane two, he fired at the target in lane three.
Instead of a medal, Emmons ended up in eighth place.

Can you see *yourself in these stories*?

I can see myself.

I can see myself trying really hard to get it right,

but pointing at the **wrong target**.

I can see myself trying really hard to make something work out,
only to find that I'm driving the **wrong way** down the highway.

Do you ever find **yourself** in a similar situation?

Aiming at the wrong target?

Running in the wrong direction?

See, Paul realized what we need to realize as well:

God **doesn't want just law-abiding citizens**.

God wants something **more** than that.

God wants **sons and daughters**—and there's a difference, isn't there?

Do we realize this is what God wants of us?

To be sons and daughters?

To be in **relationship** with God, in Jesus Christ?

That's **different** than trying to keep **score** and do everything just right, isn't it?

That's different than trying to hit the **right target**,
or drive or run the **right way, only to find out you're wrong**.

We are so often striving to do things just the right way,
which is usually **our** way...

Where is God in that kind of life?

What if we tried focusing on a **relationship with God first**,
and let the rest fall into place?

What if we saw Christ as someone we want **to know and love**....and out of that
knowledge and love we started **going the right way**?

Paul repented and made a **180-degree turn**.

He realized that the goal was nothing we can do on the **outside**,

Not our accomplishments, not our striving,

rather the goal comes from what's **inside our hearts**.

The **real goal** of this race we call life is a **heart that knows Jesus**.

Is that **our goal**?

Have we **realized** this truth yet?

Or are we ***still trying so hard*** to do things our own way?
 Are we living the way we think is right,
 Instead of following Christ?

It's ***not that all our accomplishments*** and families and jobs and choices are not important, it's just that the ***most important*** thing is a ***relationship*** with one person, Jesus Christ.
 The ***rest should come from*** that relationship.

But is Jesus the most important thing to us?
 Or are we ***settling for something less*** than that relationship?

I think this happens a lot, right?
 We ***settle*** for just ***trying to be good***, trying to ***look good***, trying to ***impress*** other people....
 when really we could have a ***life-changing relationship*** with Jesus!

All too often ***we settle*** for what we think are the best prizes in life.
 Friends, family, finances, health.

C.S. Lewis wrote once that we human beings are ***far too easily pleased***.
 It's like we are content with ***Spam*** when free steak is on the menu of life.

We fool about with little things like "drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."

Once you get to the ocean, ***will you settle for playing in a mud puddle?***
 -from C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

So too Paul writes last week that even the things he had,
 as good as they might be,
 they are actually to him, ***like garbage***,
 in comparison with Christ.
What if it's all junk without Christ?

I like the way Pastor Tim Keller talks about ***finding our joy in Christ***:
 Do you remember when your mother used to say, "Don't eat candy before meals?" Why did she say that? Because she knew it would ruin your next meal.

The trouble with eating candy is that it gives you a **sugar buzz**, and then you don't feel hungry. Candy **masks** the fact that your body needs proteins and vitamins. The sugar buzz from candy **masks your hunger** for the real nutrients that you don't have.

Things like sex, power, money, and success—as well as favorable circumstances—act like **spiritual sugar**. Christians who have these spiritual candies may say, "Sure, I believe in God and I know I'm going to heaven," but they're actually basing their day-to-day joy on **favorable circumstances**. When the circumstances change, it drives us to God, because when the **sugar disappears**, when the candy gets taken away, we're forced to pursue the feast that our souls really crave. [That's when] We'll hunger for the **spiritual nutrients we really need**. Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, from the sermon "Joy," (preached 4-18-10);

It's like how physical food **pales in comparison** to the **spiritual food** we get to take and eat today in The Lord's Supper!

Paul says in Philippians 3,
I want to **know Jesus and the power** of his resurrection.
He wants to know Jesus.

Do we?

Or are we **settling for candy** when we could have real spiritual food?

When Father Brennan Manning became a monk,
his superior explained to him that once you come to **truly know the love of Jesus**, nothing else is ever as beautiful as that.

What if knowing Jesus is **better than anything** we could ever imagine?
What if that **love** that Christ has for us is beyond our imagination?

Now, I know some of you do run—**but I don't**.
I run for a bit, but mostly I have to walk.
That's about the best my arthritic body can do.
But I will say there's something exhilarating about
just being outside walking, breathing deeply, exercising.

And I'm so **impressed** by people who have those 13.1 or 26 stickers on their cars. Wow. To run a marathon would surely feel amazing.

Now, maybe you're not runner. But that doesn't mean we can't **learn something** from people who are.

There's an interesting book called "**Born to Run**," by Christopher McDougall. He argues that most people are running the wrong way -- literally. We view running as a means to an end, like getting in shape or living longer, and when we run, we try to protect ourselves against injury and pain by padding our feet with the latest high-tech running shoes.

McDougall points to the **Tarahumara Indian tribe** of Mexico. I mentioned them a few years ago, because they know a different way to run. This tribe has honed the ability to run hundreds of miles **without resting, and without injury!** This is partly because when the Tarahumara run, they wear only **very simple sandals**, and so from a young age they learn to run upright, on the **front pads of their feet** instead of on the arches or the heels, the way our shoes encourage us to run.

But beyond this, they run the way they do because they understand that **running is a way of life**. It's something we are made to do (ok, some of us!). They understand that we are **born to run**. Running isn't a chore, or a means to an end. Running is **a gift**, in and of itself.

There is a scene in the book where a well-known track coach is watching two Tarahumara runners compete in an **ultramarathon** of 100 miles through the mountains (can you imagine?). The track coach is studying the runners, watching their technique, trying to figure out what makes them tick, and what lessons he can take back to his own track team. But what strikes the coach the most **isn't their technique**; It's their **joy!**

These runners race up one of the course's most heartbreaking hills, and they are ***laughing, like kids*** playing in a leaf pile!

What makes the Tarahumara special

is that they ***haven't forgotten what it means to love running***. From a sermon by Jeremy Troxler. Oct. 2, 2011, in Duke University Chapel. Source: McDougall, Christopher. *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. Random House, 2011.

What if the race of life was ***filled with joy*** for us?

What if we ***loved the race, the journey*** of faith?

Well, ***why can't we?***

What ***do you love*** about your ***journey*** through life?

What do you love about your ***faith***, about following Jesus?

What do you think about ***Jesus' love for you*** in this race?

Paul was in ***prison*** and he loved both the journey and the prize at the end!

What do you love about following Jesus?

I love ***pastoring*** this church.

I love the ***worship***—the music, the prayers, the liturgy.

There's something wonderful about welcoming that ***light of Christ***.

I love ***preaching*** each week, and sharing the good news.

I love ***the conversations***, in your homes, and in the community, getting to know you, and being welcomed into your personal lives....

where God makes ordinary moments ***sacred*** and extraordinary.

I love the ***Youth Café***, welcoming the kids, serving them, just loving them by offering a safe space.

I love that this ***church welcomes everyone***, especially those who have been ***left out*** or left behind elsewhere.

This is a place where everyone may not agree on all the issues, but everyone is ***accepted and welcomed***.

And I love that.

I love that ***Jesus never ceases to amaze me***.

I can take a walk every morning, counting my ***blessings*** with God—and every single morning there is ***something new*** to give thanks for.

A pretty tree I've never noticed, or an insight I hadn't had.

I love that our **Wednesday Bible study** has studied pretty much every book of the Bible, but each week we learn something **new**, regardless of how many times we've studied it before! Isn't that **awesome**?

So, **what do you love** about your faith journey?
What do you love about following Jesus?

What if we are born for this race—this **relationship** with Christ?
What if we were made to keep our **eyes on that prize**,
and to actually **enjoy** the journey?

What if just knowing Jesus gives us the kind of **passion and joy**
that can **sustain us** through the toughest times?
That's exactly what keeps me going every week,
It's what brings me joy
even when my private life is falling apart.
I can smile up here on Sunday, not because everything is great,
but because God is great.
Because I know and love Jesus Christ, and he knows and loves me!
That keeps me going!

Friends, hear the **Good News** of the Gospel today:
We were **born to run a race of faith**,
forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.
we were made to **press on** toward the goal of Christ Jesus.
May we each find the **joy of following** our Lord and Savior,
And to that, all God's people said, Amen.