

no vacation, and no spiritual renewal opportunities because of managing two tasks. I was so depressed that I finally burned out. That burning-out experience during my ministry at the Korean congregation stuck badly in my mind for a while. Whenever I visited a Korean church in the Chicago area, I remembered my struggles, hurts, and painful experiences of the past. Since I have served several churches in the Northern IL Conference, I have tried to let my past ministerial experiences go. Now I am grateful that I let go of my past and focus on my ministry at Faith Church.

Paul had plenty of hurts to dwell on as well. His entire ministry was carried out under the open hostility of those around him. But he refused to look back and dwell on the unfairness of life.

In today's text Paul is saying that if we want to achieve greatness in the Kingdom of God, we must not look back at the successes or the failures of life. This will only slow or stop our progress. It will keep us from winning and achieving any victories in our Christian walk. Hebrews 12:1 says, *"Let us throw off everything that hinders...and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."*

How is your race going? Do you need to stop looking back so you can return to moving forward? Are you training as hard as you should or are you resting on the achievements of the past? Do you have good mentors or other growing Christians to watch and learn from? Are you running on the right team? How is your run going?

Let us see every moment, every facet of our lives, as an opportunity to become more like Jesus. Let us give our entire lives to God's purposes by running life's race in such a way as to win this prize. We are the people who run to win until we arrive at the finish line in heaven.

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Philippians 9: Let's Win the Race

Philippians 3:12-16

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One of the enjoyable moments during my elementary school years was a track and field day. It was not only a school event, but a community event. All parents and community leaders were invited to that event. There were Korean traditional dances and other entertainment, as well as several games among students. While I enjoyed those activities, I didn't like the 100-meter race. Usually 8 kids ran together and only the top three could get a prize. I never got a prize, not even a third place prize during my school year. I thought I was lucky if I wasn't the last person in the race.

In our text from Philippians, Paul compares the Christian life to a race. According to some biblical scholars, Paul attended Olympic-type events and it led him to see that the Christian life is a lot like an athletic contest. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 he said: *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."* For Paul, the goal, the prize at the end of the finish line of our life race is to become like Christ. Back in verses 10-11 he said, *"I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing his sufferings, becoming LIKE HIM."* So, Paul's reason for living, his goal in life, was to become more and more like Jesus. And as Christians, it should be our reason for living, our goal in life, as well. Now, in today's text Paul states two principles that will help us to achieve that goal.

1. The first principle is never quit training. In other words we should never stop striving to grow spiritually. In verses 12 and 13 Paul writes, *"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on....I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining to what is ahead I press on."* Paul felt he had not

arrived at spiritual maturity yet. It is hard for us to be perfect in our faith journey. So our training should never end. We should never quit trying to grow more and more like Jesus in our thoughts and actions. We need to continually strive for Christian perfection.

We know that learning doesn't end after we graduate from a high school or a college. No matter what career track we pursue, we need to continue growing in the knowledge of our field so we can stay sharp. We may find several teacher's institute days on the school calendar. The teachers needed to have a time for continuing education so they can be equipped with new learning and to prepare for a better education. Doctors and nurses take a certain number of course hours every year in order to practice medicine. The Board of Ordained Ministry in our conference and UMC strongly recommends all pastors to have a time for continuing education and spiritual renewal every year. It's the same way in the Christian life.

In today's text Paul says, "I'm still learning. I'm still a student. I will be one all of my life." There is always more to learn when it comes to understanding how to do what Jesus would do. A sign of spiritual maturity then, is the recognition that we are not yet mature. No matter what we attain in life, it is hard to reach spiritual perfection so we need to always be humble in our evaluation of ourselves.

2. The second principle is never look back. In verse 13 Paul says he, "...forgets what is behind and strains for what is ahead." Many people stubbornly hold on to those things that happened yesterday. This stubborn holding hinders enjoying all that Christ has for us today. For example, some people cannot release from their minds the accomplishments of the past. They live on their past triumphs, a cherished memory of yesteryear when they were on a spiritual mountaintop. Looking at the past has stopped all forward progress. They constantly stand looking back at the good old days!

In Old Testament history when God led the people of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, God provided everything that they needed for their journey. They had shade by day and light by night.

They had water to drink and manna to eat. However, the Israel people ceased to look forward to the Promised Land and instead looked back to their life in Egypt.

Unfortunately, today there are many Christians who are constantly looking to the past. When was the last time that you experienced joy or excitement by God's blessing, word, love, or grace? 5 years ago? 10 years ago? 20 years ago? Is your faith based on past sacred or holy experiences with God? As our youth members shared their experiences during Quest Camp, they had a wonderful time meeting new friends and studying the Bible, as well as playing fun games. The highlight during the camp was the moment they experienced Jesus and confessed Jesus as their savior during worship and prayer time. This was a great spiritual experience and a God moment for them. But, I don't want them to look back on those experiences; I want them to look forward to find ways to continually grow their faith in Jesus. We cannot linger on our past experiences. We should experience God's presence, grace, and blessing every week, every day, and every moment. Paul had plenty of spiritual mountaintops in his past. But as he says here, "I'm forgetting the good things of the past so I can reach out for the better things that are ahead.

Some people can't release from their minds the hurts of the past. They spend all their time fondling and nursing some wound or secret hurt. They focus their minds on the past so that it consumes all their energy in the present. They forget that no matter how long you nurse a grudge, it won't get any better.

As I told you before, one of my painful experiences was when I served a Korean congregation in New Jersey. While I studied as a full-time student at the seminary, I worked hard for the ministry. My priority was ministry, so I sometimes skipped several evening classes for pastoral visits. But doing both full-time study and ministry was too much of a burden for me. I had no time to rest. It seemed that I was not doing both studying and ministry well. I had no day off,