The Heavenly Call COMMUNION October 4, 2026

Scriptures: Philippians 3:4b-14

4b If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more:
5 I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. 6 With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless.
7 These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. 8 But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ 9 and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. 10 The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death 11 so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.
12 It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. 13 Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. 14 The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus.



As we begin, we must acknowledge the passage that we are working from this morning is often read as a passage about getting into heaven. You might get that from the title of this message too.

While this passage from Philippians 3 *can* be read that way, I do not believe that this was Paul's primary intent. For Paul, the faith he lived and the faith that he called other disciples of Christ to live was a deeply embodied faith, lived fully in the present. Paul calls all believers, then and now, to live a faith that is present in all times and places, that goes out to God, to self, to neighbor, and to all of creation. In today's passage, we hear the call to press on daily, working together through the grace that empowers us to continue the walk of faith. As we prepare to hear about our heavenly call this morning, let us begin with a centering prayer…

> *God of love, you have shown us the way of peace with each other. You have given us Christ's example, the foundation of love. Today we begin to see and understand how you save us from the self-righteousness that leads us to rely on our own resources. Give us the courage to give away those things which make us count in the world's eyes. Pour your will and way into our hearts and spirits, so that we can be counted worthy of the gospel of Christ. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and that the meditation of all of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.*

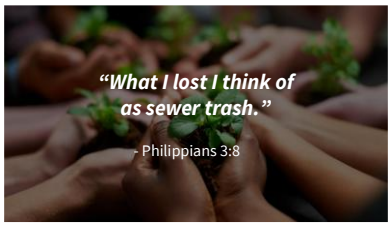
Please turn with me to Philippians 3, beginning in verses 4-6, as Paul offers a list of all that he gave up in order to follow Christ. Granted, this list reads like a humble brag about Paul's confidence, based on his past accolades. Verse 4 begins with the "if anyone could brag" thought. In the New Living Translation, the lead up to Paul's list of past accomplishments reads this way: *"Though I could have confidence in my own efforts, if anyone could..."* If anyone is qualified, well, here let me tell you why it is me. And, yes, Paul actually lists out his past accolades: *"circumcised on the eighth day… of Israel… of Benjamin… a Hebrew… a Pharisee… harassed the church... blameless"* under the Law.



All of these accolades speak to Paul's zealous faith – before he met Jesus. While we do not have the collection of spiritual brownie points that Paul has, we are not beneath playing the comparison game at times. We stray into looking at others and thinking that we are either a "better" or a "worse" Christian. Both are equally dangerous. We read or hear things and question other's faith or, even worse, wonder if they actually are a Christian at all.

In Paul's defense, part of him is torn between two worlds. We find ourselves here too. While what he has lost, these *"assets"* as Paul calls them, are of no value to him any longer, there is a sense of loss or maybe of longing that he might be struggling with. Christians today, us included, can have these longings and can feel a sense of loss. Our past successes – financial, political, social, relational – takes a "hit" when we decide to follow Jesus. Pursuing the things of God instead of the things of the world, once in a while we can look back on that plush office or on that fancy car or on that extravagant vacation and we can feel torn. While not hoping to return to that old lifestyle, we can miss some of the perks and "assets."

Turning to verse 7, Paul declares that he has written off his former accolades or assets as a loss. He has chosen to do so that he can now follow Christ. Paul has chosen to set aside what used to matter to him and what mattered in the religious circles that he used to hang out in, so that he could follow Jesus as the Lord of his life. What's more, it is not just that the corner office or the peer recognition was simply given up for Jesus. In Christ, Paul sees those things of the world in a whole new and very different way. In verse 8 he states, *"What I lost I think of as sewer trash."* Other translations read "rubbish" or "dung." Paul has come to be repulsed by what he was, by those things that pulled him more towards the world than towards God. What things, habits, or sins from your old life cause you to feel this way – maybe repulse or maybe just cause you to shake your head in disbelief? I have a few.



This is how Paul feels about his old resume, about those accomplishments and accolades that he used to be so proud of. At least, he feels this way when he compares it to his new life in Christ and thinks of Christ's heavenward call. Paul feels nothing but joy when he thinks about sharing the good news and about drawing others into the ever-widening circle of faith and about inviting others to walk alongside him on this journey to become more like Christ. Paul knows a new peace too. His old self would judge and condemn others that he saw as less than or as different. Paul sees all as worthy of Christ's love and grace. He does not see levels of discipleship either. Paul recognizes that all believers are on a continual journey to know Jesus more and more. His job – and our job – is not to rank or judge or condemn but is to walk together in faith, striving side by side, seeking to know Christ more.



This was Paul's call to evangelism, and it is our call to discipleship. Like Paul, we have our experiences with Jesus, and we have the stories of how Jesus changed our lives. Part of that story of change is about what our old self was like and what our new self is becoming. We have the story of what we were like before knowing Jesus and we have the witness of our lives after Christ. Like Paul, we can share the things that we laid aside and now count as a loss as a testimony to the redeeming and transforming power of Christ and his love. Paul did not speak of this laying down as a means to bring glory to himself or as a way to climb some new Christian social ladder. Yes, in his old life, he certainly did. We once did too. But as new creations in Christ, all that we say and do and even think should point to Christ's glory. Paul chose to use his story as an invitation for others to hear, to embrace, to move closer to, and to know the one who gave Paul his strength, peace, meaning, and purpose. Our lives and our stories can do the same for others.

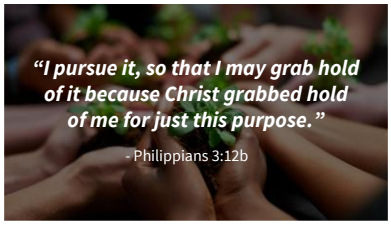
And the best thing about Paul's story? It is the best thing about our story too. Paul's story is not about who he was, but it is about who he is becoming. Paul was not inviting others to "look at me," but to walk with him as they each sought imitate Christ. Paul would argue that we are never there but are always pressing on in our faith.

As we turn to verses 9 and 10, we gain a clearer picture that Paul is not primarily talking about one day when we go to heaven. Yes, it will be amazing and awesome to one day bask in the presence of the glory of God, to worship the Lamb on the throne. It will be fabulous to enter an eternal kingdom where the will and way of God is lived out 24/7. But in these verses, Paul focuses in on righteousness. That is the prize that Paul strives for, even longs for. The old Paul would have defined righteousness as a strict adherence to the Law. Follow the rules. Do not deviate from the straight and narrow path. Paul no longer understands righteousness in this way. Once he was saved by Jesus, Paul came to understand righteousness as the embodiment of God's justice and mercy and love.

To embody righteousness – that is a concept worth spending a little time with. To embody righteousness is a 24/7 activity. When one allows righteousness to embody one's life, then our faith influences everything: how we live our day-to-day life, how we set our priorities and hold our values, how we make our decisions large and small. Jesus is our main example, of course. All that he said and did was said and done in righteousness. Paul strove to imitate Christ, to allow righteousness to guide all that he said, did, wrote, and thought. Paul sought to live out his faith, to model Jesus to others 24/7. This striving, this seeking, it is what allowed Jesus' righteousness to become Paul's righteousness. And if we look at verse 10, we see how Paul came to have Christ's righteousness. It was from knowing Jesus as Lord, from understanding the power of Jesus' resurrection, and from participating in his sufferings. It was not taking just the good but not the bad. It was a 24/7 commitment to Christ.

Paul develops what this kind of commitment looks like and how it is lived out in verses 12 through 14. But first, Paul begins with an admission: he is a work in progress. In verse 11, we read about why he seeks to live a life of righteousness: *"So that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead."* Here Paul is talking about the end game, about heaven, the final goal of our faith. But he quickly pivots in verse 12, where he is clear that he has not already reached this goal. Nor has he *"been perfected."* No, Paul is a work in progress.

As we push on in verse 12, Paul states that this goal is something that he pursues. If we are honest, it is a goal that we pursue, that we strive side by side for. As because it is a goal of ours, we press on in the daily living out of our faith, with the goal of heaven ever before us. Speaking of this goal, in the second half of verse 12, Paul writes, *"I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose."* Paul works at it. He strains forward in the faith, with all that he has in him. Why does Paul want to grab hold of this goal? Why does he pursue this goal? Because Jesus pursued Paul and because Jesus grabbed hold of Paul. My friends, Jesus pursues you and me. My friends, has Jesus grabbed hold of you?



We cannot miss that last part: *"for just this purpose."* Jesus grabbed hold of Paul and Jesus wants to grab hold of everyone for the same reason: to obtain resurrection into new life. As Paul experienced and as all who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior experience, new life is a now and then concept. One day all who believe will be resurrected to new life in heaven. But now, in our daily living, we can experience resurrection again and again. We celebrated this earlier in worship when we partook in holy communion. But mercy and grace and forgiveness are not only found when we take communion. We receive God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness every time we confess and repent of our sins, being made new each time.

This pursuit of Jesus and living a life of righteousness is what Paul aims for. It is his singular focus. In verses 13 and 14 we read of this effort and focus: *"I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."* Paul forgets all that he has done in his past – as a Pharisee and as a follower of Jesus – and pursues the one thing that lies ahead: *"the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."* This upward call is not just the path to heaven. It is also a call to live each day seeking to bring heaven to earth. The Passing of the Peace question aimed at this reality.



This one thing that Paul pursued, it is the one thing that we are called to pursue, to focus on, to aim for. We are called to press on in our faith, seeking to build the kingdom of heaven here on earth. We can press on in many ways. We press on through our spiritual disciplines – prayer, Bible reading, meditation, worship. We press on through acts of mercy – giving an elderly neighbor a ride to an appointment, bringing a meal to a family that lost a loved one. We press on through works of justice and inclusion – standing and speaking for those without voice or power, encouraging those who have been excluded or those who do not feel like they might fit in to come and join us.

We press on, seeking to build community and to deepen relationships, both with God and with one another. We press on, empowered by the Spirit's presence in our hearts, working towards the kingdom vision that Jesus gave us through his example and teachings. This vision of Jesus is the heavenly call: the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. As we press on, may it be so for you, for me, and for all that we meet. Alleluia and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

1) *Grow.* Paul writes of *"forget about the things behind me,"* of letting go. What won't you let go of that is keeping you from growing closer to Christ? How can you let go?
2) *Pray.* Where is God calling you – to greater spiritual discipline, to acts of mercy, to works of justice and inclusion? Pray for courage and direction from the Lord.
3) *Study.* Read Philippians 3:15-21. On a scale of 1-10, 10 being high, how would you honestly rate your spiritual maturity? What needs to change so that you might be like Paul, someone that others looked to as a model of faith?