

Enjoying Life By Putting Away the Past [Slide 1] Phil. 3:13-14

In his book, *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*, James Belasco describes how trainers shackle young elephants with heavy chains to deeply embedded stakes. After many failed attempts to escape the elephant stops trying so that even when it is a powerful adult you can stake it down with a wooden stake which it could easily pull out, but it never does. It is so conditioned by its past failures it never even tries to escape. Some people are so trapped by the past mistakes or hurts that they cannot enjoy the freedom Christ offers. Today's sermon is about how to have joy by putting away the past.

I invite you to turn in your Bible to Philippians 3:13-14. Philippians is the eleventh book in the New Testament. Go past the four gospels, the books of Acts and Romans, the two Corinthians, and you will come to Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians. Philippians 3:13-14. Read. I have listed on your outline what I believe is the main idea of this passage. We should pursue becoming like Christ while overlooking the past.

[Slide 2] Paul begins in verse 13 by reiterating that he knows his present condition. He knows that he has not yet laid hold of it. What has Paul failed to lay hold of? Look at Verse 12 in your Bible. Read. Paul has not become perfect yet. He presses on in order that he may lay hold of that for which also he was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. What is he pressing onward to lay hold of? He is pursuing God's ultimate will for us: our sanctification, that we become perfect like Jesus.

Paul demonstrated a very healthy view of himself that we need to have if we are going to enjoy life. First, Paul recognized that he was not perfect. He knew that he still made mistakes. Paul was at peace with that realization. He did not berate himself for not being perfect. He did not punish himself for not being perfect. He did not become depressed because he was not perfect. He acknowledged the reality that he was never going to be perfect in this life. Paul accepted the fact that he was a flawed person.

Paul's self-acceptance was a healthy self-acceptance in that he did not justify or rationalize his sin and failure. He owned his sin and mistakes. However, he did not become complacent about his imperfections. Paul did not take the attitude of "Oh well, that's just who I am. I'll never change." No, in verse 14 talked about how he pressed on to reach the goal of the upward call. Paul strove to become better.

I bet if I personally interviewed each one of you and asked if you are perfect, not a one of you would say that you were perfect. Most of us intellectually know that we are not. However, many of us act functionally as if we were perfect. We don't admit our mistakes. We don't apologize. We don't ask for prayer or help for our weaknesses. It is not that uncommon in counseling for a person to freely admit that they are not perfect. That is easy to say. The real test is when I ask them, "What did you do wrong?" and they look at me with a puzzled expression and they cannot name one specific thing they have done wrong. Then I know that they are self-deceived.

Paul wasn't perfect, but he wanted to be better. He was not willing to settle for his present level of imperfection. Healthy, happy people accept the reality of their imperfection, but not their sin. They want to be better. They pursue righteousness. Even though they know that in this life they will never obtain perfection, they want to get as close as they possibly can. Twice in verses 12 and 14 Paul describes how he is pressing

on. He is not settling for the status quo. He is not settling for mediocrity. He wants to be the best he can without being a neurotic about his failures.

Joyful people have an honest and balanced understanding of themselves. They know their weaknesses. They know their strengths. They want to improve their weaknesses.

[Slide 3] Then Paul gives what I believe is one of the greatest keys to enjoying life. He says in verse 13, "I am forgetting what lies behind." Overlooking the past and not getting trapped in the past is a real key to enjoying life.

Let's look a little more closely at Paul's statement in verse 13 about forgetting what lies behind. The Greek word that Paul uses in verse 13 for forget is the Greek word *epilanthanomai*. I have listed for you all the occasions this Greek word occurs in the New Testament. In looking at its usage, we can see that this word often refers to an overlooking of something, rather than to a loss of memory.

In Luke 12:6 the Scripture says that God does **not** forget even the sparrows. The word there does not mean that God could actually forget something. What it means is that God will not stop feeding and taking care of sparrows. He will not overlook them so as to fail to take action on their behalf. In that context the word means to fail to take action. God does not forget. He does not fail to take action.

In Heb. 6:10 it says that God is not so unjust as to forget our work for him. What that really means is that God is not so unjust as to not reward us for our work for him. God will not overlook the work we have done for him and fail to reward us.

In James 1:24-25 you see a nice contrast between the one who forgets in verse 24 and the one who remembers in verse 25. The one in verse 24 who forgets what he looks like is the one who fails to take action. In verse 25 the one who remembers is the one who becomes the effectual doer. This meaning of "failing to act on the basis of something" is seen in these examples of the word in the New Testament. So, for example, if you take a brief glance in a mirror and look away, you may overlook that some strands of hair or out of place or you may overlook that something is lodged in your teeth and you fail to take action to comb your hair or brush your teeth. But if you stare intently at the mirror like you should look intently at God's Law, then you are likely to notice the things you need to change and not forget to do something about them..

This concept of forgetting is a very common throughout the Bible. When the psalmist cries out to God not to forget his people, what the Psalmist is actually asking is for God not to stand back and do nothing on behalf of his people. The psalmist really does not believe that God can literally forget that his people exist. When the Psalmist asks God to remember his people, what he is actually asking God to do is to act on behalf of his people.

So forgetting the past means that I overlook what happened in the past so that my actions in the present are not based on the past, but rather based on the present or the future.

What in the past can rob us of joy in the present? We can look at the context and derive part of the answer from Paul's own list of past achievements in verses 5-6. Look at the list Paul gives of his past in verses 5-6. Read verses. Both the successes and the failures of our past can rob us of joy in the present. A number of things in Paul's list are successes. Some were successes that were not Paul's doing. The circumstances of his birth, who his parents were, those were successes that were not Paul's choice. Other things were Paul's choice. He chose to live as a Hebrew of Hebrews, meaning that he

learned to speak Hebrew and he kept the Hebrew ways rather than the Greek ways. Paul chose to be a Pharisee, which among his own people was a highly respected group.

Your past successes, if you try to live in them now can rob you of joy in this life. Let me give you some examples of how our past successes can hinder us from the life of joy God has for us now.

One big danger as we grow older is that we are more tempted to rely on our past successes rather than serving God in the present. My in-laws attended a church that was composed almost completely of retirees. Many of them said things like, "I did my church thing growing up. I taught Sunday School for 30 years. I did this. I did that. Let someone else do the work now." As a result of that attitude and those choices not to serve, they were losing the joy of serving God in the present. Their lives became empty, hollow, and self-serving.

The day I can no longer serve God and live for him, is the day I want to die. I do not want to die before I die. I do not want to be like the man whose tombstone said, "He died at age 34. He was buried at age 74." There is no joy apart from living for God. If your past successes are causing you in the present to choose not to serve God, then forget your past. Forget the things that lie behind and stretch forward to what God has for you now.

A second way that people can get locked into past successes is with particular ministries. God used them in a ministry and blessed them in that area in the past. Then they begin to assume that is where God wants them the rest of their life, and that may not be true. We sometimes hold onto ministries or program that have long lost their effectiveness. Sometimes a church has to forget what has succeeded in the past in order to embrace what God is doing in the present. If the church does not do that, it can find itself in the position of resisting God's work and that causes a loss of joy.

Past failures can also rob us of joy in the present. When Paul reviewed his list of past accomplishments he recalled that he had persecuted the church, his most memorable failure. He hurt, imprisoned, and maybe even killed believers in Jesus. It was a tremendous failure. Guilt and shame from our past failures can rob us of joy in the present. Is there some past failure or sin that haunts you and sucks the joy right out of your life? Tell Noble Doss story. He couldn't let go of that one mistake.

Brothers and sisters, God forgives our past sins and failures. He wipes the slate clean as soon as we confess them. You don't have to be trapped by your past. That is also what Paul meant when he referred to forgetting the past.

The real failure is not what happened in the past. The real failure is allowing the past to defeat you in the present. The following piece of advice appeared in the Wall Street Journal. It is a modern restatement of Paul's exhortation to forget what lies behind. Read Journal article on p. 145 shell book.

There is another failure of the past we need to forget. It is not our failures but the failures of others against us. Child abuse, desertion by a mate, betrayal by a friend, those who mistreated and hurt us, those who lied to us and deceived us, those who manipulated and used us. A whole range of things happened in the past that were not our doing, but someone else caused us great harm and hurt. We need to forgive them and then overlook the past. This is where God's words are so helpful, because God's word is not saying that you can actually forget and erase from your memory what happened. What God says is don't let the past corrupt your present. Don't let those past hurts prevent you from developing healthy relationships now. Don't let past sins against you cause you to live in

bitterness now. Don't take out on others now the anger and hurt caused by others in the past.

Overlooking the past can be very difficult. A woman who has been sexually abused as a child can have a very hard time giving of herself sexually to her husband. A person who had a harsh and cruel father can have a hard time trusting in God. A person who was bullied and teased incessantly as a child may have a hard time trusting other people as an adult. But it can be done, especially for a Christian. If you get to know Jesus and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings as Paul describes in verse 10, then you will have the ability to forget what lies behind and press on to the goal that lies ahead. You can ask Jesus to walk with you back into that memory and heal it so that it does not afflict you like before.

Is there any value in remembering negative things from the past? Isn't it a good thing to learn from the mistakes of the past so that we don't repeat them? Yes it is and that is why I am so impressed with this particular word, forget, that Paul has used in this verse. Epilanthanomai does not rule out the possibility of learning valuable lessons from the past. It does not mean that I cannot use what I have learned from the past to influence my decisions. What it does mean is that my actions and behavior are not dictated or determined by the past.

Let me give you an analogy of the proper use of the past. Imagine that you are driving a car. What you are seeing outside your windshield is your present and in the distance is your future. The trip you are taking and the direction you are headed should be determined by your chosen destination. Where do you want to go in your life? What do you want to accomplish in your life? What do you want to be in your life? These things should determine your direction, not something in your past. While you are driving, what you are seeing immediately in front of you determines most of your driving decisions. You make turns, change lanes, adjust your speed, stop, brake all because of what you see ahead of you. Your present should be determining most of your short-term decisions.

However, located at the top center of your car windshield is a rear-view mirror. Located on the sides of your car are side view mirrors. Occasionally you have to check those mirrors because if you do not, something that is behind you might still hit you. Usually you need those mirrors the most when you are changing lanes. You are making a decision in the present but you need to reference the past to make sure there is not something in the past that you need to remember or recognize that may influence when and how you change lanes. Yes, we need to learn from the past because that will help us make better decisions in the present. But woe to the person that is driving down the highway with their eyes glued on the rear view mirror. They are eventually going to crash because you need to spend most of your time looking out the windshield toward the present and the future.

That is what forgetting the past really means. It means living in the present in light of the future, making my decisions based on what lies immediately in front of me as well as what lies way ahead of me. I occasionally refer to the past for those lesson I have already learned that will help me make better choices in the present. Otherwise, I live in the present not in the past.

John Claypool tells a story that beautifully illustrates how to deal with our past. Read p. 94 Fish book. Pick the fruit of the past and burn what is left. Or as Will Rogers put it, "Don't let yesterday use up too much of today."

[Slide 4] Getting rid of the junk helps us to start enjoying life, but the real key to enjoying life is to set our sights on that which will bring ultimate and eternal joy. That is what Paul did. He forgot what lay behind and he pressed on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

What is the prize of the upward call? It is becoming one with Christ and becoming like Christ. It includes knowing Christ intimately and becoming like Christ in our thoughts, character, and attitudes. It includes being perfectly righteous like Jesus. It includes having a new resurrection body like him. You and I will receive the full prize when we are resurrected. However, apart from the new resurrection body and complete holiness, we can have a lot of that prize now.

That is why Paul pressed on. His knowledge of Jesus was only limited by how much he wanted to know Jesus. His experience of perfection was limited by how much he wanted to live righteously and obediently. In short, we can have almost as much of the prize now as we choose to grasp. Paul recognized that and so he strove with his utmost to obtain the prize.

The word "press on" that Paul uses in verse 14 was used in the Olympic Games to refer to an athlete who was stretching forward toward the finish line. Have you set your sights on the goal and are you pressing on?

Robert Ballard was the man who found the Titanic sunk 350 miles off the coast of Newfoundland. Ballard describes the first time he saw the Titanic. Read Ballard quote. For 13 years the quest for the Titanic dominated his life. What dominates your life? The quest to know Jesus and to become like him dominated Paul's life and he forgot everything of his past in order that he might reach that prize. People who have a worthwhile goal in their life and are gaining on it, enjoy life.

You can enjoy life more by understanding and accepting your present condition, by overlooking your past, and by pressing on toward the goal of knowing and being like Christ.

At the end of the service we are going to have a time of ministry of prayer. I have asked the elders and some of the life group leaders to be available up at the front for prayer. If you have any prayer need that you would like for someone to pray with you, then I invite you to come up and pray with someone this morning. If you who have something in your past from which you need to be freed and want prayer, please come up. You don't even have to explain what it is. You can just ask for prayer for a past event and God will know what we are praying for. For now, let me close in prayer.