

**“Courage to Be First”**

**Philippians 3:10-16**

**January 24, 2021**

**Fourth in Series on Courage**

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*“I take hold of Christ because Christ has taken hold of me.”*

**- Philippians 3:14**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, give us your grace to place you first and to run the race before us with faith, holding on to you as you hold on to us. In Christ’s name, we pray:  
Amen.

**Message**

I would not be telling the truth if I shared that I am not a competitive person. Wanting to be first comes with a degree of intensity, of wanting to win the prize, whether in a board game or in a basketball game. After all, isn’t why we keep score, ala Vince Lombardi? That is the goal of competing right, to win?

I can always remember how, at least in high school, I would compete in the half-mile race with a very good runner from Castle High School. It seemed as if we would run against each other during the big races. As I recall, the race would always seem to come down to the last fifty-yards and then we would find out who had enough gas in the tank to get to the finish line.

Now, the half-mile is a difficult race because it is not quite a full-sprint, but it requires endurance at a very fast pace. It is one of those races where, when you turn the last curve, the legs are burning, the muscles are aching, the heart is pumping, and the sweat is rolling off the face. The question is how much is “left” at the end.

The runner from Castle and I always seemed to flip-flop between first and second place. Back and forth, we would go, but the competitive spirit ran deep.

## Running the Race

I share that little experience to dovetail with Paul's image of running the race in our passage today: Paul likens the Christian life to an athlete who seeks to win the prize (Phil. 3:14).

It is an image that he uses in First Corinthians as well, where he writes about running the race in such a way so as to win. In fact, Paul asks the Corinthians this question: "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one wins the prize? Run that you may obtain it" (1 Cor. 9:24).

His point in *that* Letter was about having the kind of discipline necessary to complete, or to have a single focus in terms of living as a Christian (1 Cor. 9:26). In Corinth, Paul could see how many were running aimlessly, or without any purpose, as folks seemed to be running into each other with all kinds of conflict, rather than building up the church's life and mission (1 Cor. 9:28).

In Philippians, Paul also wants to encourage believers to run the race as well, only here, Paul is writing to persuade the members of the church to "have the mind of Christ," or to "be minded" in Christ together (2:5). In other words, when Paul offers "Christ as the model of faith," he wants to make it clear that we need to find ways of moving toward, or running toward, this model, or this goal, toward having the mind of Christ (Phil. 3:13).

After all, Paul believed that *the goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus*: to love, to care, to give, to serve, to heal, to suffer, and to sacrifice the way Jesus did (Phil 3:10, Rom. 12:1-2).<sup>1</sup> Not that Paul believed that he was Jesus, or that he had even attained this goal. He had not. In fact, he confesses as much (Phil. 3:12).

Rather, the thing that Paul wants to emphasize, the thing that carries him toward the finish line, that keeps him running the race in the first place, even with temples pounding and bones hurting, is Christ himself, Christ crucified and risen (Phil. 3:10-11).<sup>2</sup> Paul speaks of this as the power of Christ's suffering, and the presence of Christ's resurrection, and it is what keeps Paul going (Phil. 3:10).

Indeed, as Paul says, the reason he can "press on" to this goal, the reason he can "strain forward" and "fight the good fight" and run the good race, is because of

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, "Throwing Away the Good Stuff," in *Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

what Christ has done, of who Christ is (2 Tim. 4:5-6). To *that* end, Paul can keep on running without watching his feet or falling down.<sup>3</sup>

Listen to how Paul himself puts it. In fact, I think this might be one of the most important verses in this letter. Paul writes, “But I press on to make Christ my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil. 3:13). Some versions of the Bible put it: “I can take hold of Christ because Christ has taken hold of me.”<sup>4</sup>

It is another way of saying that we can seek God because God seeks and finds us (Lk. 15:24). We can know God because God knows us (1 Cor. 13:10). We can come close to God because God is close to us (Rom. 10:5).

Such a relationship with God does not mean we might think we do not have anything to do. No, in Paul, there is sometimes a struggle to receive what God has given us. There is also very much a “working out our own salvation in fear and trembling” here, even as we accept God’s grace (Phil. 2:12).

And yet, we also need to realize that, at least from this passage, our relationship with God does not mean that we simply add Jesus to an already busy schedule, thinking we can just add a little of Jesus here and a little of Jesus there.

No, this kind of running involves the whole person. It involves the whole person with a single aim, which means that if you have ever run in a race, you know that one of the main things you do, is stay focused: you don’t look behind you. You don’t look to the side. You don’t look back over your shoulder to see who is coming! No, you keep your eye on the prize!

## **Letting Go**

In fact, earlier in this chapter, Paul writes about how it might become necessary, in order to keep the focus on Christ, to let go of things, even valuable things (Phil. 3:8).

Following Christmas this year, Peggy and I went through our garage and closets and found ways of getting rid of things, of things we didn’t feel we needed anymore. Just got rid of it! Thank God for The Lord’s Cupboard!

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; cf., *The New International Version* is one version of the Bible that translates this passage using the words to “take hold” of Christ and Christ “taking hold” of Paul.

Over the last year, I have also gotten rid of numerous books I don't feel I will read or get to. Just boxed them up. Half-Priced Books in Greenwood now cringes when I show up!

I don't know about you, but I think that there is always something good about lightening the load, or of tossing out the obsolete. I mean, can you think of things in your life that you might want to throw away, or let go of?

The examples I have just given are small, and they are *not* what I would consider "most valuable." I am sure, for instance, I can do without more books, or clothes. I have enough, thank you very much!

No, what I have in mind here is more important. For example, I am mindful are those who went over the Rocky Mountains in Conestoga wagons, where it was a matter of life and death as to what they would have to toss out – e.g., pianos, chest of draws, and other valuables – if they were going to make it.<sup>5</sup>

I mention this example to connect with Paul is saying: if we are to have the courage to be first, or the courage even to run this race, then we need to *consider in full* what that truly entails; because what Paul has in mind here has to do with "letting go" of some important stuff.

I mean, here is someone whom we would probably want teaching Sunday school, right? Here is someone who is committed; he is honest, productive. He is faithful. He is a Pharisee, which means he knows the Bible. He has wonderful DNA; it is all there!

But Paul takes all this pedigree of his, all this incredible Jewish lineage, or what is important, and he tosses it out. He calls it rubbish (Phil. 3:9). And I want to ask, Why would he take it all to Goodwill? There are some valuable things here. I mean, I get the idea of getting rid of bad habits and poor attitudes. Put them in the garage sale and depart with them! No problem! But the getting rid of what is good so that he can run the race?

Throughout my ministry, I have seen people, who join the church who don't quite grasp what the commitment entails. I mean, they might pick-and-choose the parts they like in church; and they might do-a-little-here and a-little-there; they might serve on a committee, and they might even pray they go to heaven someday. It is what I call "Christian-ease"! And I suppose we all have symptoms of it.

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<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock, "Throwing Out the Good Stuff," 95.

And yet, on the flipside, I know that it is also tempting to think that Paul is laying a guilt trip on us here: who can ever live up to this standard? Why bother?

### **Holding On**

But I don't think that is what Paul is doing.

No, I think Paul is getting at something else: Paul throws out his most important “stuff” to “take hold” of Christ, because he knows how Christ has taken hold of him. Christ has called out to him (Acts 9:1-19). In other words, when Christ took hold of Paul on the Road to Damascus, and called out to Paul, Paul could not help but take hold of Christ and then seek to imitate the One,

Who took the form of God, but did not count equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but instead emptied himself, and became human,  
a humble servant, obedient unto death,  
even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

In Paul's way of thinking, the reason we can take hold of Christ is because Christ has taken hold of us and called us, and this is what it looks like – a giving up and a letting go, a pressing on and straining forward.

I believe it was my seminary professor, Fred Craddock, who called this message a message of downward mobility: Jesus comes from the very heart of God, from all that was good in God. He came from the ivory places of glory, possessing all that was wonderful, and he tossed it all, becoming human, like you and me, obeying God, even unto death.<sup>6</sup>

And what Paul says is, “If this is who Jesus is, then how can I still seek upward mobility? How can I keep all that I have – good and bad – and follow some other cause or movement, or leader, and remain faithful? How can I run this race with any sense of purpose?”

More to the point: How can any of us? How can I? How can I claim to be a follower of this “God in human form” and keep my own agenda, my own pride, my own stuff, and just add on “church” as it may or may not fit into my schedule, or my plans? How can I tack on my faith around the edges, and keep my life intact, when I run toward the One who gave it all up and tossed it all out, and came down

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<sup>6</sup> Fred B. Craddock, “Throwing Away the Good Stuff,” 97.

here, to become a servant, for me?<sup>7</sup> What kind of courage do we need to put *this* first? What kind of grace does God provide to reach this goal?

Because we are running the same race, aren't we? Aren't we? The same race? Running toward the One who has taken hold of us?

I thought so too.

Running the same race.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Fred B. Craddock for these insights.