

First Things: Christ First  
Philippians 3

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Happy New Year everyone! This week I was reading about people's sentiments coming into a new year and a new decade. I saw several things that caught my eye. One person said, "I love staying up to watch the ball drop. It reminds me of what I did all year." Kind of unfortunate! One person said, "At the beginning of last year I made a resolution to lose 10 lbs. It's now late December and I only have 15 more to go." One woman wrote in and said she made a resolution to read more, so she went to the settings in her TV and turned on the subtitles. We all know that if we are going to tackle this new year and this new decade the way God wants us to, there are certain things we have to do right, certain priorities we have to put first. When it comes to putting first things first, this illustration has always helped me!

So here's the question: of all the things we could prioritize and pursue this upcoming year and decade, what are the things that we have to put first in order to become the sort of people God wants us to be? Over the next three weeks we are going to talk about three things we have to put first. You might be thinking, three things that's too restrictive. Whenever we are forced to reduce something down to absolute essentials, we end up with a purer product. Think about that with me. **CS Lewis** once said, "**I would write you a shorter letter if I had more time.**" Think about that. In the late 1950's **Dr. Seuss** took a bet from his publisher, Bennett Cerf, that he couldn't write a successful children's book using only 50 words. In 1960 he released **Green Eggs and Ham**. The entire book only uses 50 unique words, and with eight million copies sold, it is ranked as the 4th best selling children's books of all time. Great things happen when you are challenged to reduce something down to its absolutely essential. **Earnest Hemingway** was challenged to write a story using only six words. He mullied on it for a painfully long time and then wrote this story. **For sale. Baby shoes. Never worn.** What a story. Is your mind racing? Is your heart hurting? Great things happen when you are forced to reduce something down to absolute essentials.

What happens when you reduce life down to its absolute essentials? Here's the answer we want to talk about: **Christ first, Kingdom first, Character first.** Today, we are going to talk about what it looks like to put **Christ first**. I want to look at what the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3. If you have your Bibles, will you turn there with me? **3:4 If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.** What is Paul saying here? He's saying that in his former life, before he met Christ, from a religious perspective he had everything going for him. He was born into the right family. He had the right lineage and pedigree, he was dedicated to the Lord at birth, and as an adult, he became a part of the Pharisaic movement. Now when we hear the word Pharisee we have all of these negative connotations coming to our minds. Hypocritical, judgmental, legalistic. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were religious heroes. Today, many parents dream of their kids growing up to become a professional athlete, or a doctor, or a CEO. Back then, parents dreamed that their kids would grow up to become a pharisee. Pharisees devoted their entire life to God's word. They memorized the entire Old Testament, and then they went throughout the community and taught their neighbors how to apply the Scriptures to their everyday lives. Clearly they lost their way, but we have to remember that in the 1st century, they weren't just highly respected, regarded, they were revered. Paul is saying that when it comes to religion and right behavior and following the rules, there was no one more committed than him. Then he came to realize that what really matters is not religion, not right behavior, not following the rules, it's having an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

Look at how the passage continues: **7 But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.** When Paul says that he considers all of his religious achievements as **garbage**, the Greek word used there is *skubalon*, and it's actually a very crass, almost profane word. It means excrement. Paul is saying, "Everything that I had going for me, all of my religious achievements and commitments, it all amounts to one big pile of cow manure." The only thing that matters to me now is Jesus. **10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.** Did you see how committed Paul was to knowing Christ? It's one thing to say, I want to know **the power of his resurrection**. Who doesn't want to share in the victory and triumph of Christ? But Paul also said, he wants **participation in his suffering**, that he is willing to **become like him in his death**. He not only wants to know and follow the Jesus of Easter Sunday, he wants to know and follow the Jesus of Good Friday. Not just Jesus breaking out of a tomb and conquering death, but the Jesus nailed to a tree, tasting death for our sakes. Don't miss that, Paul says he is willing to embrace pain, sorrow, heartache and suffering for the sake of knowing Jesus.

Look at the next few verses, I love the way Paul summarizes his present priorities. **12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.** Do you sense his humility? He saying I haven't arrived yet. Remember who's talking there. This is Paul, the guy who Jesus appeared to face to face. The guy who became an apostle, a guy who wrote thirteen letters of the Bible, a guy who spent the second half of his life traveling all around the world telling people about Jesus, a guy who for Christ's sake was impressed, beaten, stoned, flogged...he gave everything he had for Jesus and what does he say: "**I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.**" Knowing Christ is his goal, and as far as he has come, he knows there is always more ground to take.

**But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 3:13-14** Let me point out several aspects of this statement: Paul says that there is **one thing** that he does. Not 20, not 10, not five. Here is the one thing I am focused on. He says that he's **forgetting what is behind**. That right there is a word for someone today. Think about all the things in his past that Paul could have focused on... persecuting Christians, like killing people for their faith...but not just wrong things done by him, wrong things done to him, wrong things done to him, friends who had deserted him, people who had betrayed him, people in leadership positions who beat him. Paul didn't focus on the mistakes he had made inducing shame and regret. He didn't focus on the wrongs done to him, inducing bitterness and anger. He didn't live his life looking in the rearview mirror! Neither should we. Paul said that he was: **Straining toward what is ahead**. I love this language and the imagery. It is the picture of a runner, giving it everything they've got toward the end of a race to be the first one across the line. Maybe you saw this from a few months ago. The SEC college track and field championships were taking place, and these men were running the 400 hurdles. The previous year, Robert Grant came in second place. He thought about his second place finish all year long, and take a look at what happened this year as he came **barreling down the homestretch**. *Link imbedded.* (Start at 39 seconds. Run to 1:08 // And then 1:36-1:44.) **Let me show you that in still frame!** You want to talk about straining toward what is ahead! That's a man who wants it. What would it look like for us? What would it look like in your life, if this is how we pursued Christ this year? Not just, I'm going to come to church a few more times.

Not just, I'm going to try to read my Bible a little bit more. I'm going to try to be a slightly better person. No! We are going to put Christ first and strain toward the finish line, we give it all we got!

Let's pull that verse back up because there is one more phrase I want to highlight. **But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** It's the phrase: **I press on.** The Greek word for this phrase is dioko, and one of the more common uses for this phrase is to hunt for something. And you might say, Dan, how does hunting have anything to do with this pursuing a goal? Let me ask you, how many truly serious hunters do you know? I am friends with some serious hunters. They all have taken a lot of money and bought large plots of land, just to ensure they have access to their own deer, and that no one disturbs them. They plant corn and soybeans and hay, not to harvest and sell. They plant them just to give their deer something to eat. To keep them on their property. They have cameras set up all around their fields, so they know just how many animals are on their property. Then have pictures of this eight-pointer, this ten-pointer, this twelve-pointer. They come up with names for them like King Kong, Hercules, High Tower...and they send pictures of these deer to all of their other hunting buddies. If you look at a true hunter's phone, their camera roll is not filled with pictures of their kids - it's pictures of animals they are trying to harvest. Friends, that's just preparation. When season opens do you know what they do? For months they will shower with scent free soap, use scent free deodorant, wash their clothes with scent free detergent, use scent free toothpaste, so that these animals are less likely to smell them. If that's not enough, they will then buy samples of deer urine you can get at the store and sprinkle deer urine on themselves. Then they will spend days on end, sitting in 20-degree weather until just the right animal come walking by.

I am not exaggerating! The true hunters I know do all that and more. Why? Dioko. They have a goal, they have a passion. They have a prize in mind, and they will do whatever it takes, pay any price, to realize their prize. They press on. Will we press on toward the goal to win the prize, not of a monster buck, but to the prize that God has called us heavenward toward in Christ Jesus? This year, will we put Christ first!

In Ephesians 5 we are cautioned: **Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:15-16).** How do we make the most of every opportunity? We put Christ first. We don't want to get to the end of this year and say: I hit my physical goals and I hit my professional goals, and my relational goals...but I missed Jesus. We have to put him first. And there is no time like the present!

Several years ago, when the country of **France decided to become a part of the European Union**, they converted all of their money from Francs to Euros. The exchange window began in 2002, and lasted all the way up until 2012. There were years for people to walk in any bank, hand over their francs and walk out with euros. During that 10-year period of time, francs had value, but they had to be converted. After that window of time closed, what happened to people's Francs? They still exist, still have the paper currency, but have absolutely no value. They are outdated. They are obsolete, and you can't go back and trade them in. Think about the value of your life. Think about your days, your weeks, your months, your years as currency. Your time, your life is of very real value. It's a limited commodity. And we have an opportunity to invest our time and our lives in such a way where we get something back which has great value, or we can spend our time in such a way where, years from now, we will have nothing to show for ourselves.

I don't know about you, but when I look back on my life, I regret pursuing a lot of things that didn't turn out the way I thought. I regret spending time in a lot of ways that ended up producing no long term gain. I have never regretted a single moment spent pursuing Jesus. In fact, if I could go back, the main change I

would want to make is to have Jesus more and more and more at the center of my life. This is a new year, that can be our new reality. In the end, that's what we are going to want more than anything else.

Maybe you are sitting there and saying, OK Dan, I'm with you, but how. How am I supposed to put Christ first. Let me offer three suggestions.

First, **Prayer**: join us for our prayer initiative. We are going to take two straight weeks as a church and participate in 24/7 prayer. EXPLAIN. Sign up. Join us. It might be just the jolt you need.

Second: **Conversation**. Ask one family member and one friend to speak into your life. I know this might be challenging. This might seem like an awkward conversation at first, but go to your spouse, a parent, a grown child...whomever in your family you are closest to, and then go to someone in your life group, or your most spiritually mature friend and ask them this question: how do you think I can pursue Christ more this year than last? What would it look like for me to grow in my walk with Jesus? That conversation is going to require a lot of humility, can you imagine the invaluable insights you will likely walk away with?

Third: **Accountability**. Once you have spent time in prayer and talked to a few people about how you can put Christ first, reach out to people you spend time with and ask them to hold you accountable. The old proverb is true: you can go fast alone, but you can go far together. The guys in my life group have spent the last several weeks talking about how we can honor Christ in five specific areas, and now we get to hold each other accountable to that.

Colossians 1:10 says this "**Live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.**" Isn't that what we want to do this year?! Put first things first. Put Christ first. Live a life that is worthy of him, and pursue him in every way. When I was dating Keren, I knew in my heart she was the one I wanted to marry, and as we got close to proposal, I was trying to figure out what kind of ring she would like most. There are a thousand options! White gold, yellow gold, rose gold, round cut, princess cut, marquise cut. solitaire setting, halo setting, three stone setting. And you of course also have to decide how big of a diamond to get. I'm a guy, I didn't know what to do. So I had to poke around a bit and ask questions. Keren is very humble and not flashy in any way, so I thought she was going to want something subtle, something simple. So one night I asked her, "Keren, I take you as the kind of girl who would probably prefer a small diamond???" She just looked at me and said, "No." Apparently there are no girls that would prefer a small diamond!

Because I love Keren, I tried my best to get her the ring she desired, not the cheapest right, but the ring she wanted, the ring she was worthy of. How are we approaching Jesus?! Are we coming to him and saying, Jesus, I take you as the kind of king who died on the cross, forgave all my sins, rose from the grave, conquered death, is ruling over all the universe trying to reconcile and restore all things...and you probably want to be, what...4th place in my life? 3rd? 2nd?

This year we want to live a life worthy of the Lord. Not take the cheap way, the easy way, the convenient way. We want to put first things first, we want Jesus first!