

**Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 30, 2018, by Rev. Jim Byrnes**

RUNNING THE RACE: FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

Philippians 3:12-16

Well, I want to say Merry Christmas because for us to really understand Christmas, we receive the gift of Jesus Christ, every day. It's not just December 25th. We're the Christmas people, receiving Jesus Christ every day. I'm reading from Philippians Chapter 3, starting at Verse 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. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

In Philippians Chapter 3, the Apostle Paul desires to understand and grasp why God has grasped him. What is amazing about the Bible is that it is not just a list or an encyclopedia of what God is, that we can find things, but that it is done through dynamic relationships and in problems. We have been grasped, we have been apprehended by God, each of us for a purpose, and on this life, on this race, we are to struggle to find out why he grasped us, why he pulled us out of the mess of humanity and what that reason is.

I have a video that I would like to show. Watch this video.

OK. Picture the adoption of this young boy. His name is Carter and he comes to your family as a foster child. And then the foster parents say we want to adopt you forever into this family. Mom wraps her arms around him. And instead of whatever his story is, he's received into the family. We are that little boy. We're the little boy who is sitting there, feeling like maybe an outsider, a second or third class citizen. We don't know where we fit, then we open up a present from our Lord God, who says we want you in the family; we want to adopt you; you are here with us next year; you're in the picture; you're there. I was that boy. You were that boy. The book of Philippians is the note that explains that Jesus Christ wants to adopt us into the family of God.

This passage in Philippians says, not that I have already obtained this or that I have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. The Lord Jesus Christ grabbed you, apprehended you, embraced you and pulled you out of society for a purpose, a goal, a reason. It is not by mistake. It's not by chance. It's the plan of God.

The Westminster confession, which is our statement of faith in the Presbyterian Church, asks the question: what is the chief end of man?

What is the chief purpose of man? Does anyone know it? And what is it? To glorify God. And you knew that, right? He was whispering it already, right? You know that one gone. You're right. To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

I've visited orphanages. I've spoken on retreats with orphans. They're lonely. They don't feel like they fit in, but here this family decided to take that little kid in for whatever reason. I wonder what he was thinking. Did you feel it? Open it up. Let's see what the present is. It's a picture. Great. I can remember them and that means a lot. When he reads the note, it hits him. He's overwhelmed. Sometimes you get it, sometimes you don't.

Sometimes the light goes on and it's one of those lights where once you see it you can never un-see it. It is an experience with God. It is an experience that is spiritual, when we pause and we say, let's get this in focus and realize what is this life about and why did Jesus Christ grab you. What was his purpose in that?

What does he have in mind for you as we finish one year and go to the next? In reality, January 1st is just another day. You can make any spiritual change in your life. You can do it in June. You can do it. March. It doesn't make any difference, but when we finish a year we start to think, what are we going to do this next year?

We reflect on the past and we think about this year coming up. Why has Jesus Christ put you on this earth? The Westminster Confession says we're here to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Presbyterians tend to emphasize the part about glorifying God and not the part about enjoying God forever. Many Christians are known more for the idea of glorifying God than the enjoying. They're not known in this culture as being people who are happy and enjoyable necessarily to be around. They see us as judgmental. They see us as hurting.

And by the way, I'm going to mention this. I say to Neil every time I come here-- you're one of the friendliest congregations I've ever been a part of. The friendliest. You just greet each other. I think that you're friendly. You're friendly, sincere, real, and transparent. So let me encourage you. In this family, if you adopt people and bring them in, you do that with the love of Jesus.

OK, let me get to the passage here. Paul, who wrote a third of the New Testament, had a clear desire. His clear desire was to know Christ and the power of the resurrection. That was his focus. And what we have in the scripture is this picture of transparency. Him being real. Here he is, a man who has much to brag about, saying I have not attained it. I do not fully understand it. I do not completely understand what I am writing about. This is the man who's written more about it than anybody else. And he's saying, I don't fully get it, but I'm on this race and I'm reaching for it to understand it more and more and more and that is spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not arriving, but it's pursuing. It's the journey over the destination. What's the destination? To give glory to God. and to understand why he has embraced you. Each of us in this sanctuary has unique gifts and talents that are to be used by God for building his kingdom. And it is not possible to say you're not important. It's not possible to say I don't have anything important.

You know, as you saw in the video-- everyone wants to be loved and everyone wants to be important. And those two things can be found in Jesus Christ. In fact, I make the bold statement that these things can only truly be found in Jesus Christ because He's the One that gives us true unconditional love and He's the One who gives us a purpose.

But if you head into to this next year without a purpose or forgetting your purpose or going on, it's like spinning wheels in snow or in mud. We start out and we say, this year I'm going to serve God, this year I'm going to love God. This year, I'm going to struggle to be more and more Christlike. And then we forget.

There's this old couple. They're in their 90s and they were forgetting things. That can happen when you're in your 90s. Yeah, that can happen. So they go to the doctor together and tell him that they're forgetting things. They asked, "Can you give us some medicine so we won't forget things?" The Doctor says, "You're just getting old. I would suggest you write things down."

So, they're sitting in their living room and the husband gets up and the wife says, "Hey, would you get me a bowl of ice cream?"

He says, "OK."

And she says, "Maybe you should write that down."

He says, "No, I can remember a bowl of ice cream."

"Would you put strawberries on it?"

"Yeah, I'll put strawberries on it."

"Would you write that down?"

And he says, "I don't need to write it down. I can remember a bowl of ice cream with strawberries."

"Would you put whipped cream on it?"

And he says, "Yeah, I'll put whipped cream on it."

"You should write it down."

"I'm not going to write it down!"

So he goes to the kitchen and 20 minutes later he comes back with a plate of scrambled eggs and she says, "See, you should have written it down. You forgot my toast!"

The point of the story is that we start out going to the kitchen. We start out in this life and we forget where we're going! We forget. We get distracted by whatever this year will bring. Will you pursue a life of following God, of loving people? Of using your unique gifts? Don't let anyone hinder your gifts. Use your gifts to build up, to support people-- whatever those gifts are. You maximize. Forget the things that you're not good at. Go for the things you *are* good at—the talents that God gave you. He is giving you gifts that are written in the Bible.

That little note that Carter [in the video] got? This is our note. It says, we want you to be a part of the family. You're going to be in the picture next year. You're in our picture. I love you and you are important to me.

Well, this race that we're running is interesting. The book of Philippians is an amazing book. If you're trying to decide what to read this year, can I suggest Philippians? I'm going to focus on

one book a year. That's what I do. Philippians is my book. I need Philippians this year. I love Philippians. There are a total of four chapters in Philippians. The theme of Philippians is that there's joy no matter what the circumstances are. There is joy no matter what the problems are. There is joy that we can experience-- a life of joy in the midst of whatever the trouble is.

I used to work with a man named Lloyd Ogilvie and I'll never forget standing there after a sermon and a man went up to him and Lloyd asked him how he was doing. The guy said well, "I'm doing fine considering the circumstances I'm under." Lloyd asked, "Well why are you under the circumstances?"

Philippians is great there's four chapters. It's just about the only book in the Bible where the divisions work. You know the divisions are not necessarily ordained by God or inspired. In the book of Philippians they are four main sections and it's great, tremendous-- for me to live as Christ in Chapter One, and Chapter 2-- let your attitude to life be that of Christ Jesus. Chapter Three-- that I may know Him and the power of his Resurrection and in Chapter Four-- I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me.

But Paul is like a runner. How many here have ever run a 10K race? How many have run a 10K or more? How many have run a ten mile race event, a mile right? We've got a few. How many here have run a marathon? We've got a few. Those are the idiots. I join you. I want you know the first one who did it, he died. Died. OK? He died. That should have been a hint to us not to do it. But Paul is like a runner pressing on to the goal. He's just going on to fully grasp why God has grasped. Have you grasp why God has grasped you. This is Paul with all his accomplishments, trying to grasp.

It's not perfection. Let me let me correct this. Paul was correcting those that were legalistic and Gnostics who believed that you could attain perfection. You cannot obtain perfection. In fact, perfection really can be defined as more the journey, rather than the result in the Christian life. That's it. Perfection is resting in him, not never making any mistake or sinning.

As it says in 1st John, anyone who said he has not sinned deceives himself. This passage of course, has some interesting things in it because in the Greek there are a lot of verbs, but there's no object. It goes on. He talks about pressing on, but let me say this about the race. We are on this race. It can be a rat race. I don't know if you're in the right race. I don't know if you've given up on the race or got distracted.

You can go the wrong way in the race. I don't know, you can evaluate. But this Christian life, this race-- the first thing about it is-- it is an imperfect race. It's messy. There are problems in this race.

When I ran my marathon, I originally signed up for the Marine Corps Marathon, but couldn't do that, so I shifted over to the Disney World Marathon. Everything went wrong. I flew down, they lost my luggage, I didn't have the right shoes, I didn't have what I needed. It was a mess and I finished 45 minutes later than I planned on. That's not very good really-- 45 minutes-- that's a long time. But it was messy.

When you're in the race of life, it's messy. It's full of interruptions. It's full of problems. And let us be clear. In the Bible, in the New Testament for instance, almost all the teachings we have from Jesus, and all the teachings we see in the Letters and the Epistles, are because of problems or interruptions. Almost all of them are, and that's what life is.

As a parent, you know this-- those that are parents know that parenting is never clean. You set out a plan that your kids are going to do diapers different than all the people you know. Am I right? And then after six months, you've broken all those rules because it's messy. Life is messy. The race is messy, but we pursue on. And if you fall, you get back up. If you go off on the wrong path, you get back on the path.

It's messy. It's full of interruptions, full of problems. We live in relationship and we go on that race. We go, we confess our sin, and move on. You know Bob Dylan? He was a singer, sort of a famous singer, when I was in college. He came out with what some believe is his best album ever. One song on that album was called, "Tangled Up in Blue." In fact when he was interviewed once, he said when that song came out he was in the worst depression of his life. The song has this line in it-- tangled up in blue, the past was close behind. The past was close behind and in the race, you've got that past that keeps grabbing you, hindering you, bringing you down, hitting you, knocking you down, trying to trip you up.

But what Paul says, as he is running this race, he is forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. Jesus says, put your hand to the plow and go forward because if you don't put your hand to the plow and you look backwards, you will not go in a straight line, or you'll hit a rock, or something weird.

We are to forget the past—that is the successes and failures. The failures of the past bring us guilt and the successes of the past make us prideful. But to move ahead, we've got to forget the past and ask God, what do you have for me in this upcoming year? What do you have for me going on? The past is behind. I'm going to move forward in the grace and love of Jesus Christ, knowing that He has laid out a plan for me, that He's laid out great things for me to do. Don't miss them this year. Don't miss them.

Well, the first thing is we are in an imperfect race. The second thing is that we're to grasp that purpose and keep it in mind. I said Write it out. I said that couples should write it out. They have now discovered that when you write out your goals, you were four or five times more likely to accomplish them. What I have tried to do in this last year, is to write out two things every day, and it has transformed my life. I write out my own personal purpose perk purpose statement and I also write down the things I'm thankful for. I write three things every day that I'm thankful for and it has my entire attitude to life. Instead of being negative, I start becoming positive. And I start seeing people, not as problems in my life, but as opportunities, and people that I can love. It's transformational.

We must put in our mindset, keeping in our mind what that purpose is, because in this world of distractions, like never before in the history of the United States of America, we are distracted by phones, computers, media and advertisements, cars cutting us off—People just walking in front

of you. It seems like very few people say pardon me anymore. Have you noticed that? Very few people hold the door anymore. They'll go right through and cut you off.

But instead, stop and ask yourself-- what is my purpose in life. And when you make your purpose to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, you bring other people in to that purpose and it can transform their lives. That's everyone. That's the clerk at the store. That's the man that picks up your garbage. That's the one that you do not like at work. That you recognize that purpose-- so write it down. Figure out why God has grasped you and write it down. And when we do that, like the apostle Paul, we go on. We go on.

Well, I think I've run out of time I just have one other thing—another little story. Have you ever noticed pigeons? I think they're sort of nasty, but have you ever noticed how pigeons walk? They walk funny don't they? Pigeons cannot focus their eyes when they're moving. They take one step and then they have refocus. They take another step and they have to refocus again—they do that every time they take a step-- and that's why they're walking around funny.

Pause. Pause now, before you go back to work before January 1st, and ask, why has God grasped me from this pool of humanity and put me where he's put me, and what is the purpose and the goal. And I'll tell you-- it is to glorify Him in your relationships. It's to enjoy the things that are around. And don't let the circumstances stop you from seeing your focus and your mindset to be to follow God, to lift Him up, and take the grace that you've been given and share it with others. You've been adopted into a wonderful family-- reflect it—and now, communicate the message of adoption to those who are on the sidelines. When you run this race, pull others in because the Lord Jesus has a purpose for you-- in the schools you're in, in the workplace, in the neighborhoods, the family, and around that person who is difficult to love.