

February 3, 2019

## Lesson 10: Renounce Everything for Christ

Scripture: Philippians 3:7-14

### Context:

Once again, our lesson returns to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. The lesson picks up in the middle of the letter as Paul alludes to some of the issues within the church. In the verses before the ones we read today, Paul is addressing some individuals who are stirring things up in the congregation.

While he does not give names or everything they believe, most scholars think that Paul is addressing Judaizers. Judaizers were those who advocated that in order to become a Christian, one had to be a Jew first. We read about most of their teachings and tactics in Paul's letter to Galatia.

Thus Paul faced the challenge of motivating a group of people who were teaching the complete opposite of what he was teaching. Their constant rebuffs lead him to this point in the letter where he talks about his identity in Christ. As Paul speaks of what he "loses" to follow Christ, he is not tossing away junk.<sup>1</sup> He has given up parts of his identity to follow Jesus and he wouldn't trade it for the world. He does not diminish Judaism or even those who hold to the law; he simply gives a different perspective in which he feels that everything from Christ surpasses what he already knows.

To lifelong Christians, this talk might sound strange. But for Paul to be this transparent about his faith and conversion is to inspire and give hope to the church in Philippi. There were many people in the early church who were probably Gentile, yet walked away from their families and the gods of the area to follow Jesus. For some it might have meant permanent separation and a new identity change. The same might have happened to the early Jewish community who converted to Christianity.

Paul speaks in poetic language about participating in the power of Christ's resurrection and participating in his sufferings, even that of death. Paul is helping the people understand that their faith journey is more like a long run than a short sprint. To drive the point home he moves to the metaphor of being in a race through life. While not sure if he is trying to downplay the Judaizers and their easier approach to life through a gospel of works, most scholars think he is emphasizing that like a run, Christianity is a journey that is long and might be hard.<sup>2</sup> Yet the prize is the call of Christ Jesus and it pays dividends in so many different ways.

Paul is giving the church in Philippi hope that they are on the right path. While things may be hard and tough, they are to keep their eyes on Jesus and not be distracted by all those seeking attention. Just like the runner on a run, they are to keep going as they seek the prize and the finish line ahead of them. The prize of following Jesus is a higher one than they could imagine and certainly nothing the Judaizers or others offer them could ever compare.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, "Philippians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1985), 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

## **Application**

As a runner, I have always enjoyed when Paul uses race metaphors to describe his spiritual journey and then use it to help others. All of his metaphors speak to the truth about running as a hobby that takes discipline and is a commitment. It is not necessarily easy, but comes with the great satisfaction when a run is completed.

What I love most about using running as a metaphor is that it also applies to our faith. Faith is not a sprint or some decision that we make in the teenage years and then everything is “golden.” Faith is not something that happens in an instant or transpires over a night. We may realize things like Christ is Lord or understand God’s grace through a worship service or small group, but hopefully it is just the start to one’s journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Like running, faith is an ongoing process. There are different points in our journey that may seem easier than others. The ground is more even and we can see the checkpoints very clearly. We may even feel that we are not to sweat “because God’s got this for us.” Like the runner’s high that occasionally comes, we feel good, almost unstoppable.

Yet like running, faith can face obstacles. There can be the flare up of a past hurt or wound that immobilizes us. Dogs not on leashes can chase us and make us terrified of what is around the corner just as we may feel harmed or hurt by others. We may even get lost on the route and miss the mark where we are supposed to turn just as we miss the directions we are given in life.

Like the race though, we are to keep on in our faith. Faith does not always necessarily protect us from everything. It is not a talisman that will shield us from things that are not in our control. But the calling and the love of Christ is what should motivate us to keep going and moving and striving to be who God has called us to be.

As you read the lesson, think about the ways in which you feel you have gained because of Jesus Christ. Think about the gifts you have been given and what that means for life today. Consider what you know what it means to “press on” toward the heavenly prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus. Reflect that in this race we call life how faith plays a role and strengthens you even when things may seem murky or strange.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of my favorite books in the Bible. After rereading this scripture and this part of the letter I realize it is because it is ultimately a book about hope for both the individual and the congregation. There is faith that even in the hard times in life, God will be with us. It may not be in the form of how or what we expect, but God is there as we press on forward. So like the runner, we keep running and press on towards the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh  
Associate Pastor  
First United Methodist Church  
1380 W. Main St.  
Dothan, AL 36301  
E-mail: [hunter@fumcdothan.org](mailto:hunter@fumcdothan.org)

