

OUR ONE THING

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

In verse 13 Paul utters an interesting phrase... The state of our world today makes it even more interesting.

Paul writes, *“but one thing I do...”* In a culture where we’re told *everything* is possible, why would you want to limit ourselves to *one thing*? Why restrict yourself to just *a single thing* when today’s world offers multiple options?

For example, in one local supermarket a researcher found 93 types of toothpaste, 91 varieties of shampoo, and 115 different household cleaners. Today’s American consumers have available seemingly endless options.

It use to be a simple task... When Kathy asked me to stop by the grocery store and pick up **“some orange juice”** - no big deal. But today this is a stressful ordeal. It requires a litany of

advance questions, “what kind of orange juice... lots of pulp, no-pulp, some pulp, calcium, fiber, low acid, light and healthy, omega-3, antioxidant?”

Buying orange juice is no longer a simple procedure.

Neither is buying that snack food staple, **Cheez-Its**.

If anything ought to be a pleasantly impulsive, thought-less decision it should be purchasing a box of Cheez-Its.

But today, choosing Cheez-Its is an excruciating task. *Which variety do I buy? Baby Swiss, Cheddar Jack, Mozerrella, White Cheddar, Hot & Spicy, Four Cheese, Colby, Provolone, Pepper Jack, Asiago, Whole Grain, Grooves, Zingz, Duoz, Reduced Fat, extra toasty, big...*

You have to choose from over 27 flavors and styles.

Today, **jeans** come flared, bootlegged, skinny, cropped, straight, low-rise, bleach-rinsed, dark-washed or distressed... To **communicate**, today’s teenager can surf, chat, tweet, zap, poke, text, *or even talk...* **Video and music** gets uploaded, viewed, recorded, downloaded, or streamed... **Lattes** come in tall, short, skinny, decaf, flavored, iced, spiced, and frappe...

To confuse our lives even further, I’ve heard that Starbucks and Cheez-Its are about to collaborate on a new flavor of the famous crackers... *“moca-frappuccinno Cheez-Its.”* (I think it’s a joke, but I’m not really sure.)

Here’s my point, with all this freedom to choose whatever we want, you’d think it would enhance the quality of our lives; *instead it’s doing just the opposite.*

In her book “Choice,” Renata Salecl asks, “How is it that... this increase in choice, through which we can supposedly customize our lives and make them perfect, leads not to more satisfaction but rather to greater anxiety, and greater feelings of inadequacy and guilt?”

With our endless choices, we have now subjected ourselves to the unnecessary stress and pressure of constantly making decisions that really don’t matter...

And after we choose, we’re often saddle with regret for making a less-than-perfect choice, *knowing we had so many other options from which we could have chosen...*

It seems the more choices that are presented to us the more complicated and complexed our lives become.

But what if I could introduce you to a different kind of life - a life of true freedom - a simpler, and uncomplicated way to live where your choices are clear, and precise, and fulfilling - *a focused life with no guilt and no regrets.*

This was the life Paul lived. And it’s summarized by this interesting phrase in verse 13, *“but one thing I do...”*

Our text this morning begins in 3:12. Paul writes, *“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected...”*

Remember Paul had a goal - a driving passion in his life. He wrote of it in verse 10, *“that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings...”* *And what a worthwhile ambition to pursue?*

To know the Savior of the world - our Creator, and Sustainer, and Redeemer - the Lord Jesus Christ!

To know Jesus isn't just acquainting yourself with the historical facts about His life on earth... or to read and study His teachings... or to even familiarize yourself with the spiritual implications of what He's accomplished...

When Paul speaks of knowing Jesus he's talking of knowing Him *relationally and spiritually - in real time*.

Knowing Jesus as in meeting Him and living in an awareness of His presence, His power, even His pain.

Even prior to becoming a Christian Paul had hoped to know God. He viewed the rigors of Judaism as the way to achieve His goal, but it failed him. Rather than make Paul righteous - and pleasing to God - it exposed His *unrighteousness*, and made him more *self-righteous*.

Paul lived blinded and apart from God, until he was introduced to *the righteousness of God by faith*... There is a goodness we can achieve that doesn't stem from what we do or don't do. It's the product of what Jesus did on the cross. He died in our place - was punished for our sin - gained for us a permanent pardon - then rose from the dead to grant us His new and never-ending life.

This "*right status*" with God was given to Paul freely - a reward for his faith. He receive *elite member status* in God's family because of what Jesus did for him.

And it's available to all of us. Humble yourself - admit your sin, and failure, and inadequacy - and muster the faith to receive what you could never earn - that's when you become right with God. It's righteousness by faith.

But this is just **a means to an ends**. Righteousness is the key that unlocks the door. *It gets us in the room*. Once inside we can know Christ - all His beauty and His blessings. A whole new world opens up to the Believer.

It's like CS Lewis' wardrobe. In his novel, "**The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe**," four British children are evacuated from London during the bombings of World War 2. They're moved to a stately, country manor.

One day, as the kids explore their new house, the youngest child, Lucy, steps into a wardrobe - a stand alone clothes closet. When she exits the other side she's in a fairytale forest of talking animals and imaginary creatures. New adventures unfold in the land of Narnia.

Of course, Lewis' story was meant to be allegorical of the Christian life. This is what happens to a person who embraces Jesus. He or she is suddenly made a child of God. The sin that separated them from God is erased.

Our inadequacies are overcome. We can now know Christ, His resurrection power, even His caring heart.

It all ushers us into new places and new adventures.

Our righteousness is like a telescope. A telescope is for *looking through*, not *looking at*. And the same is true of righteousness. You don't say haughtily, "**Look at me! I'm somebody. I'm right with God!**" *No, now that your righteous, you can know Him - you can look to Christ!*

And Paul admits he's just a beginner when it comes to this new life in Christ. He pens, "**Not that I have already attained...**" Remember, when he wrote Philippians he'd been a Christian

for over 30 years, yet he admits there's more of Christ to know, and understand, and experience.

To know Jesus is an inexhaustible experience. It's a well so cavernous, its depths can never be plunged.

Peter, the fisherman, met Jesus on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Little did he know that one day he'd write of Jesus, (2 Peter 1:3) "His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him..." *Knowing Jesus* had been the key. It unlocked everything he needed for life and godliness.

I've heard it put, "The Christian life is a river so shallow the smallest child can stand in its current, with no fear of drowning - yet it's so deep the most brilliant theologian can swim in it forever, and never touch bottom." Paul is well aware, there is more in Christ than he has attained.

Paul also knows, he is not yet "*perfected.*" In fact, the more Paul grew in his fellowship with Jesus the more aware he became of his own sins and shortcomings.

1 Corinthians 15 was written in 55 AD, about twenty years after Paul's conversion. There he refers to himself as "*the least of all the apostles.*" Fast-forward seven years to 61 AD, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians he called himself "*less than the least of all the saints.*" But then flash ahead three more years to 64 AD, he now speaks of himself, among "*sinners whom I am chief.*"

The more light Paul received, the darker his own sin seemed. In his mind, he went from the **least of the apostles**, to **less than least of the saints**, to the **chief of sinners**. *And what happened to him happens to us...*

The longer we know Christ the more we realize how undeserving we are of the privilege. None of us has or will attain perfection. We are all a work in progress.

Paul writes, “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected, but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.”

Paul’s goal in *knowing Christ*, was first Christ’s goal in *saving Paul*. His driving passion was the passion that drove Jesus to the cross. Jesus first laid hold of Paul, so Paul could lay hold of Him - and know Jesus personally.

We need to realize how desperately Jesus wants fellowship with us. He endured the cross to make a way. He’s extended an invitation. Now it’s rude not to RSVP.

This is why Paul says, “*I press on.*” He hopes to show the same determination in *knowing Jesus* that Jesus showed in *saving Paul*... *Paul* was willing to give his *all!*

The Greek word “*press*” implies “a prolonged pursuit.” It embodies two characteristics: *intensity* and *longevity*.

You could say Paul *put on a full court press* to know Jesus. And he kept it going the entirety of his life.

If you’ve ever played competitive basketball you know when a coach presses it ratchets up the intensity. A press is when your team plays defense from baseline to baseline. You no longer give the person you’re guarding a cushion. You lockdown your opponent. Get in their grill.

A full court press is controlled mayhem. And this was the type of intensity Paul put into knowing Christ!

Again, this Greek term translated “*press*” came from the world of athletics and warfare. It spoke of something rigorous, and physical, and strenuous - “*a blood, sweat, and tears*” kind of pursuit - sort of a sanctified violence.

This is what Jesus meant (Matthew 11:12) when He said, “*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*” God’s Kingdom provokes aggressive action.

No one just sits on their hands in the face of God’s Kingdom. When God invades a life, or church, or town whoever the establishment consists of feels threatened.

God’s Kingdom is a coup - it’s a leadership takeover.

Some people resist it by fighting back and asserting their own will. Others welcome it, and join its ranks to help in its progress. *But nobody responds passively.*

Nobody just lets it happen. You either meet God with open hands or clinched fists, *but He provokes a reaction.*

Here's the paradox... Righteousness is gained not by *trying*, but by *trusting* - yet building up that trust will require me to “*press on.*” Faith isn’t *passive*, it’s *active*.

Paul presses - he spends serious energy over long periods of time to achieve his goal of knowing Christ. He studied, prayed, persisted, pursued... for a lifetime.

Again, Paul doesn’t want us to think that he’s arrived in the faith. He repeats himself in verse 13, “*Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended...*”

We’re all pressing! I’ve heard the Christian life described as, “*A long obedience in the same direction.*”

The goal for you and I is *never stop growing*.

Coming to Christ is the starting point - not the end. I've heard it said, "The largest room in the world is the room for improvement." Let's never stop *pressing on*.

Paul continues in verse 13, "**but one thing I do,**" *and here is that interesting phrase...* Notice, Paul's laser focus! It's "**One thing I do, not these fifty things I dabble in.**" There're a million activities in this life that will distract us from knowing Jesus. We have to streamline our priorities. *Intensity* is the watchword!

On September 8, 2015 a British Airways jet caught fire on the Las Vegas airport runway. The left engine of the 777 blew out. Flames were shooting out around the fuselage. Smoke billowed from the cabin of the plane.

It was alarming enough to see a burning jetliner, but what was more concerning were the passengers...

Even though they were told to evacuate immediately, passengers were seen leaving with their luggage. They grabbed their carry-ons and pulled them off the plane.

And you think, what's wrong with grabbing a carry-on? Well, an airplane evacuation gets delayed five seconds when a passenger reaches for their baggage.

That means if just half of the plane's 170 passengers reached for a carry-on it would add seven minutes to the time the last passenger was stuck in a smoke-filled cabin. Someone commented about the incident, "**People love their carry-ons more than life itself.**"

I hope this isn't true of you and I. Everything in our lives apart from Jesus is just *a carry-on*. It's the baggage of this life. **Jesus is life itself**. Jesus alone is eternal life. Trust me, we won't need a thing this world offers where we're headed. Be careful it doesn't get in your way now.

Every four years the Olympic Games convene, and we get to watch the best athletes in the world compete.

For many of these young men and women, all their lives have looked forward to their brief performance.

They've sacrificed activities and vacations other kids enjoyed... Hours of training and exercise have been concentrated on this single opportunity... Everything has been aimed, and is working toward this goal...

To be an Olympic athlete you have to adopt the mentality by which Paul lived his life. You have to be a *“one thing”* person. You don't get to the level of an Olympic gymnast, or runner, or pole vaulter by laying by the pool with your friends, or playing video games.

I'll bet no one has ever heard of an Olympic athlete described as *“a jack of all trades?”* It just doesn't work that way. You have to specialize. You have to focus.

And the same is true in the Christian life. You've got to have a *“one thing”* mentality. Sure, *we go to work, and play with our kids, and keep up our house* - there's lots of stuff we do - but for a serious Christian it all gets framed around one driving passion... *to know Jesus!*

J.I. Packer writes, “Once you become aware that the main business you are here for is **to know God**, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord.”

All the stuff I do, should really have one end... In my **marriage** my wife and I want to know Christ... As I **parent** my children my goal is to know my Father in heaven... On my **job** I looking for ways to know Christ.

When you meet Sandy Adams, and size him up, realize **my end game** - the motive behind what I think and do - is to know Christ. As we *move through life* - despite the million other things vying for our attention - we should never get distracted from knowing Christ.

As Christians this is how we've been called to live! We've got to possess a “**one thing I do**” mentality.

But Paul adds, “**Forgetting those things which are behind...**” For Satan often distracts us from knowing Jesus by *bringing up* and *dwelling on* our past.

The Devil is an astute historian. It's been said, “**His goal is to make us remember the things we ought to forget, and to forget the things we ought to remember.**”

Satan is ingenuous at using *our past* to distract us from *Christ's presence*. Whether he conjures up sins that have already been forgiven and tries to weigh us down with guilt - or whether he glamorizes our former lifestyle, and causes us to forget the pain it caused...

Satan has different methods, but his tactic is to bring to the foreground “**those things which are behind.**”

Earlier in the chapter, Paul listed the achievements of his former life. He was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews.” He had a proper Jewish genealogy... He was also a “Pharisee” - he was dedicated to keeping the Law.

As to *pedigree* and *zealotry* Paul had the proper religious credentials. When Paul walked into a room he was somebody! He'd built an identity around his self-righteousness. He viewed himself as a self-made saint.

And he was quite proud of the person he'd become.

Yet when he met Jesus he did a quick calculation, “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yes indeed, I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” All his former life had meant to him, he now judged worthless. He called it “*rubbish*” or literally *manure*.

But you can believe that Satan continually tried to regurgitate the pride Paul had swallowed. He was constantly bringing up what he *had* been - aspects of his former life that had brought pleasure and kudos.

He hoped to get Paul to revert back to *a former self*.

And this is also what Satan will try with you. Whether your past life was characterized by *self-righteousness* or *unrighteousness*... Satan will pull out aspects of what *you were* that might appeal to *you now*... Stuff you were proud of, stuff that brought you pleasure, that made you somebody *then*... he uses to tempt you *now*.

This is why Paul tells us, “*forgetting those things which are behind.*” Both the good and the bad can trip us up. *Our former good* can inflame our pride - or bring back into focus some forbidden pleasure - while *our former bad* buries us under a mound of condemnation.

This is why a big part of the Christian life is forgetting the former things altogether. The past is the past.

You can have your regrets, but don't dwell on them. **Let your past remind you, but not define you.** Don't make a monument out of past successes *or* failures.

2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us how to focus, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things become new.*”

That means I am no longer the person I once was, and going back to that former identity will only cause trouble. Often we get nostalgic for the good ole days, when we were carefree - just *hanging out* with our buds - but we forget the *hangovers*, and bondage, and damage we did to ourselves and to our relationships.

“*Forgetting those things which are behind.*” The life Jesus has for you is infinitely better than what you left.

Understand, my knowledge of what goes on in the federal government's witness protection program is limited to what I've seen on television... It's fictional.

But on *Bluebloods* when Detective Reagan's key witness against the mob gets relocated, the guy gets a new name, new job, new address - whole new identity.

Yet he's also warned, never go back to your old life. Resurface and you will have blown your protection.

And the same is true for a Christian. In Christ, your past is forgotten, the future is bright. But go back to where you came from, and trouble raises its ugly head. Christ has set us free, not to back up, but to *“press on.”*

Years ago the psychological fad was dredging up hidden memories. Folks taught that the reason people stayed stuck in their sin and depression was because of unresolved memories lingering in the subconscious.

So victims were led into regurgitating and reliving their past. The only problem... that's not a biblical solution. If there's an issue you know of that needs to be dealt with - *then deal with it - confess it or forgive it.*

But the Bible never tells us to go on a wild goose chase down memory lane. Paul's instruction is not to conjure up, but *“forget those things which are behind.”*

Back in my baseball coaching days I had a saying I drilled into my players. Whenever one of the kids made a mistake - *booted a grounder or struck out at bat* - I'd tell them again, *“Put it behind and make up your mind.”*

This is what you should do when you sin, or stumble, or find yourself flirting with former things, piddling around with your past... repent and get back to where you belong! *“Put it behind and make up your mind.”*

Remember, **in Christ you are a new creation!**

This is what Jesus said in Luke 9, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” If you want to follow Jesus you can't constantly be looking over your shoulder, or relishing regrets, or worry about what ifs. You need to *press on!*

Farmers say you can't plow a straight furrow if you're looking backwards. You end up with waves, not rows. You plow a crooked row looking over your shoulder.

Likewise you can't live for Jesus while living in the past. **Past weaknesses** rob us of our hope. **Past failures** undermine our faith. **Past affections** steal our passion. **Past attractions** subvert our focus. Even **past successes** create pride and lull us to sleep. The whole point is not to live in the past, but in the present.

We should handle our past like we would a rearview mirror. An occasional glance is okay. It can be helpful.

But if you focus on the rearview mirror, you've taken your eyes off the road ahead. You're headed for a crash. It's been said, “Live with your back to the past, your hands to the plough, and your eyes to the future.”

Paul writes, “forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead...” Paul is painting a picture of a competitive runner at the finish line stretching out to break the tape.

Again the idea is *intensity*. Are you passé and nonchalant, or is there a seriousness to your faith?

Every Christian needs a live with a *forward lean!*

Paul's imagery reminds me of Michael Phelps, the greatest Olympic swimmer of all time. Phelps has had many dramatic races, but none more so than in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Over the 100 meter butterfly, Phelps trailed for 99.9 meters. But in the last fraction of a second he reached for the wall with one final stroke.

In contrast his Serbian competitor, who had led the entire race, coasted the last few inches. Phelps touched the wall just ahead of the Serb to win the gold.

Michael Phelps' wall to wall mentality won the race.

And this is what it takes in the Christian life - *a wall to wall intensity*. None of us knows the exact location of our finish line, thus we have to always be stretching...

Pastor Gordon MacDonald tells the story of his days running track. His freshman year, his coach invited him for dinner one night. After a good meal, the coach opened up a booklet with Gordon's name on the front.

He turned to the back page, which read "[June 1957,](#)" three-and-a-half years into the future. The Coach said, "[These are the races I'm scheduling you to run four years from now. And here are the times you'll achieve.](#)"

MacDonald writes, "[I looked at those times, and thought, 'Impossible!' They were light years away from where I was at that moment.](#)" But then the Coach started turning back pages. He showed Gordon the 42 month workout program he had for his young runner.

The Coach's plan focused on where Gordon could be, and a way to get there. The coach was reaching for what was ahead, not looking at what was behind.

And this is how you live the Christian life.

Following Jesus requires *forward focus*. You forget your past - your failure, your losses, even your triumphs - and look optimistically to the future. If you're with Jesus, one thing is certain, **it will only get better.**

Have you ever heard of a *funambulist*? That's the fancy name for a *tightrope walker*. There're actually schools you can attend to become a funambulist.

Yet nearly every wanna-be funambulist who steps on the wire for the first time makes the same mistake. Their first instinct is to look down at the tightrope.

If you've ever watched an accomplished tightrope walker you'll notice that he never looks down at the wire - or even beside himself - he always keeps his head focused forward. He looks at the platform off in the distance. He's staying fixated on his destination.

And this is how you live the Christian life. *Rather than allow your past life to derail you - rather than let the world's many choices and options distract you - take your "one thing," and pursue it into the future.*

Paul writes in verse 14, **"I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."**

Remember, when we were kids, I'd love to get a box of Cracker Jacks. Sweet, tasty popcorn - *with a few peanuts tossed in for good measure... What a snack!*

But the real treat was the prize inside. With a box of Cracker Jacks you not only got the snack, but a prize.

Well, the *“upward call of God”* is to know Jesus - and with that *call* comes a *prize*. **The prize of knowing Jesus is to be like Him.** Jesus rubs off on the people who worship Him. 2 Corinthians 3:18 tells us, *“We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”*

Here’s why knowing Jesus is the highest goal - *“the upward call.”* The more we know Him the more we become like Him... In a world of *endless options, deafening noises, reverberating distractions* - to hear *“the upward call of God in Christ”* is a gift of grace.

Do you know how few people hear this upward call?

Well, perhaps everybody hears it at some point in their life, *but do you realize how few people respond?*

Most folks are content to keep their head down - or their head in the sand - and just trudge through life.

There is a New York ophthalmologist that claims there are more nearsighted people per capita in New York City than in any other location in the world.

And here’s why... City dwellers who live among the skyscrapers are hemmed in on all sides by walls they can’t see over. They have no opportunity to see into the distance. As a result they lack any long-range vision. All they see are their immediate surroundings.

There is though a cure. They could look up! And not just above the city, but they could look to God and to the things of

God - to a life that is above what preoccupies the city - to a higher purpose and values.

In next week's text, this is what Paul challenges us to do - *look up!* He reminds us we're citizens of heaven!

But sadly, most people don't look up!

This even happens to Christians. We're in the daily grind - on life's treadmill - just getting through the next day - we seldom hear God's "*upward call.*" Trust me, *there is more than what you know, if you know Jesus.*

Paul wraps up his thoughts in verse 15, "*Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.*" To live a successful Christian life, put on a full court *press* - be intense and serious about your faith.

Forget your former life... Stretch into God's future... Heed His upward call, whose prize is Christ Himself!

And perhaps most importantly, rather than get bogged down with all the world's options - or paralyzed by too many choices - have a "*one thing*" mentality.

Paul is confident God's Spirit will reveal these truths to those who trust Him... Verse 16, "*Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.*"

In other words, let's all, *press on!* Together, with the same mentality, let's all focus on knowing Jesus!