ONE THING: Distracted by the Past
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Philippians 3:12-16

The older we get, the more regrets we may have. In fact, our mistakes, errors, miscalculations, bobbles, goofs, addictions, infractions, failures, breakdowns, divorces, fear, anxiety, grief and sin may shut us down. “Been there – done that” is another lament. It takes courage to enter the game. One of my favorite speeches is Teddy Roosevelt’s “It’s Not the Critic Who Counts.”

If we try to do anything of substance, we will fail. We must get back up, re-enter the ring, and try again. It is easy to lose heart. Jesus warned the disciples about this reality. Paul experienced it, too (Romans 7)

APPLICATION: Is there something from your past that is preventing you from doing your best? Peter betrayed Jesus. Paul persecuted Christians. John Mark quit on a missionary journey. God forgives us. God empowers us. Is there something from your past you need to be forgiven from? Confess it (1 John 1:9). As Don Henley sang, “Get Over It.” The devil delights when Christians are paralyzed. God did not get us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind. Get in the game again. It’s a New Year. You are forgiven. You are loved.

Paul’s story. Paul shares his past life in Phil. 3:2-11. He zealously persecuted the church about 30 yrs before he wrote it. While on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, he was blinded by a light. “For the first time in his self-sustained life, Saul found himself a desperate dependent. Not only was he pinned to the ground, he was blind. His other senses were on alert, and to his amazement, he heard a voice from heaven say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you Lord?” “Lord” means God, but the Greek word could mean “SIR,” a title of respect. He was physically blind and mentally confused. Imagine his shock when it was Jesus speaking to him. How could the crucified Jesus speak? That’s when Saul did a “U-turn” (in the Bible it’s called “repentance.”) It means to go in the opposite direction. C.S. Lewis said it’s when in a game of chess one player declares: “CHECKMATE.” But this is no game. There’s work to be done. They took him to a house in Damascus. He was blind for 3 days. A man (Ananias) was told in a vision to GO lay hands on Saul and pray for his healing. He resisted. Saul had been breathing “murderous threats” against the church. Saul was vicious. Ananias was asked (twice) to GO and pray for him. What a courageous act! When he arrived, Ananias spoke, “Brother Saul.” Wow!

I wonder why God doesn’t strike more people down like Saul. (I have a list I’d recommend 😊) 2 things. 1st, the Bible rarely shows God doing the same thing twice. Second, if God did strike everyone down, then our free will would be lost.

After conversion, Christians were still wary, thinking Saul was trapping them. How could SAUL be a Christian? Impossible! He went to Arabia for study for 3 years and back to Damascus. Then he went to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:11-24). Even after being gone for years, the Jerusalem experience was “the same song, 2nd verse.” They didn’t believe Saul could be a Christian, either. This time, Barnabas (his nickname – meaning “Son of Encouragement”) blessed him. Everything changed about Saul. Trying to KILL Christians changed into trying to lead people to Christ. Even Saul’s
name, the 1st King of Israel, changed. He became “Paul.” “Paul” means “small” or “humble.” The “King” went from first to last.

If ever anyone could have been distracted by their past, it was Paul. But, like Jesus with Martha/Mary and John the Baptist, Paul had one thing on his mind. It is all about Jesus.

Philippians 3:12-16

**Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.** 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

“**mature**” Paul is saying:

1.) Mature people are imperfect. I’ve imperfections – everyone does.

**Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect - but I press on to make it my own.** Perfection = the goal. Let’s not knock it, but nobody, including Paul, has made it. We know his struggle (Romans 7). His “old man, Mr. Hyde, dark side of the moon” was always lurking. He knew the right thing to do - but failed to do it. **Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Rom 7:24** But, perfection is his goal. He kept the focus where it needs to be. We’ve been talking about ‘ONE THING” being Jesus. That’s his conclusion: **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.** Rom. 7:25 – 8:1. No shame.

**because Christ Jesus has made me his own.** For Paul, it was less him asking Jesus into his life than it was Jesus called Paul into faith. Paul followed Christ, but Christ called him. Everyone comes to faith differently. Some have “Damascus Road” stories, but most don’t. Paul finds his true identity in Christ.

2.) Mature people are forward thinking (immature people focus on the past)

**But one thing I do:** We’ve said previously that the “One Thing” in life – our One Story = Jesus. Paul’s “one thing” is always Jesus Christ. He is THE story for Paul.

a.) they let go of the past (whether good/bad)

**forgetting what lies behind and straining forward** Peter only denied and Thomas only doubted Jesus, but Paul always remembered he was responsible for the deaths of Christians, including the first martyr, Stephen. His memory was not his focus. The key to Paul’s ability to “forget” what he had done = he was forgiven. It is also true that Paul’s focus could have been boasting about his apostolic accomplishments. He could have told about his missionary trips, his converts, his building and strengthening churches, his fund raising, his writing, He had to forget that, too.

Rear-view mirrors show us where we’ve been, but like riding a bike or skiing we’ll crash if looking behind or down is our focus. In a basketball game, if a player misses a free throw, he could shut down and despair. We all sin. We continue to make mistakes. We will continue to sin. At some point, we must forget our past and move on, else it keeps us sidelined. Wayne Gretzky, the great NHL hockey player said: “You miss 100% of the shots you never take.”

b.) they know there is a prize awaiting them

“**what lies ahead**” – What lies ahead for Paul? On this earth it will be more work among the churches (he loves) but he knows martyrdom awaits. Regardless, his ultimate focus = heaven.
Our Men’s Ministry hosted Coach Alan Trimble (Jenks HS football coach) on Friday. He spoke about what his life has been like since his ALS diagnosis. He’s a man of faith, but this isn’t easy. It was very inspiring. He also quoted a former coach, Lou Holtz who liked to say, “Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift that’s why they call it the present.” Coach Trimble, like the Apostle Paul said, is looking forward.

“I press on toward the goal” – He advances, not retreats. He has a goal. He’s not passive. He’s engaged in forward thinking. Not only will his past stop him, let’s remember by this time, he is a force to be reckoned with. Instead of the past being negative, Paul could easily rest on his success and be complacent. “Been there done that” creates a tired and bored faith. Drive on. Quit sulking.

“prize” Paul’s life is purposeful, for he constantly aims toward a heavenly goal. The prize is the fullness of blessings and rewards in the age to come, most especially being in perfect fellowship with Christ forever.

3.) Mature people are in mission. Some in Saul’s life who helped him become Paul. First, there was the martyr, Stephen. Saul couldn’t get the picture of Stephen looking at the prize out of his mind. There was Ananias. Then Barnabas. After conversion, Paul was on mission to Help Others Follow Jesus. The story was never about Stephen, Ananias, Barnabas or Paul – it’s not about ME or US, it’s so we might be HELPING OTHERS FOLLOW JESUS.

4.) Mature people worship
Someone commended our on-line presence yesterday. This person has been absent from worship over the past 6 weeks due to surgery and physically being unable to attend. We want to make our on-line presence the best it can be because there are certain people who need it. I’m very proud of this. It is excellent! However, on-line is not intended for those physically able to be present not to come. I also received this email this week from someone else in our congregation.

Tom, I wanted to give you a brief update on things in my world… with the hopes you’ll be encouraged about the sermon series and the impact it’s already made on me. My husband & I got into a rut last year… call it lazy, I guess, & we started watching church at home on Sundays. We watched consistently & felt it was better than nothing at all… but we both knew it wasn’t right. We felt comfortable in our PJs, drinking our coffee in the comforts of our home, instead of attending worship. I’m embarrassed to admit that, but it’s the truth. We took your challenge to be present in church this year & attended last Sunday for the 1st time in many months. Hearing the choir & orchestra in real life gave me chills… their sound was so much more vibrant & meaningful in person. I remembered how much I love the pictures & lights on the wall. I held hands during prayer with my neighbor that I didn’t know, & I felt the good ol’ pulse of church on Sunday. I left feeling energized & renewed for the week. So…. there you go. Your call-to-action worked for me! We’ll be there again on Sunday & consistently all year. That is the challenge my husband & I also made with each other.

I know you work hard on the sermon series, Tom, and wanted to share some positive feedback with you. Thank you for all you do!

I called and left a message of appreciation for this. She emailed this in response: Hi Tom, Yes, please feel free to read my email this week. Maybe it will encourage someone else who has also been in a rut. I realize now that our desire to get 1 more day of weekend rest before the upcoming busy week was actually not fulfilling at all. No amount of rest & Sunday coffee in your PJs can fill you up like being present at church & worshipping with others. Thanks for the push. We obviously needed it!
Where are you in this story? Are you like Saul needing forgiveness? Many say, “Well, I can’t do that because of something I did in my past.” Look at the New Testament. They all had things they were embarrassed or ashamed about. Let’s ask forgiveness for those we have wounded. Like Ananias – called but scared? Like Barnabas who unpacked and helped others get unstuck and move on? We are not only forgiven of our past through Jesus and we are not only bound for heaven and not just earth, but we are also ALL called into mission.

Let’s be the church who welcomes others. Let’s listen for God’s voice. Let’s look for those who have scales over their eyes. Let’s speak the word “Brother” and “Sister” to them. Let’s pray for them that they may be healed, no matter what they’ve done.