

Straining for the Goal

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. And I encourage you to open the Bibles in the pews at page 955 to Philippians chapter 3, verse 12 onwards.

As I said at the beginning of the service, today is our commitment Sunday day, when we focus and think about and pray about our commitment to God and serving Him here and elsewhere in our use of time and money.

But let's pray first. God our Father, speak to us from your word we pray. Teach us, rebuke us, correct us, train us in righteousness, that we may be ready and equipped for every good work that you have prepared for us.

And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. The winner of the 100 metres sprint in the 1992 Olympics was Linford Christie, the British runner.

And I well remember seeing not only the race, but those great slow motion replays of the race. And one particular TV camera had been set at the end of the sprint.

[1 : 15] So instead of seeing the race from left to right, running and dashing across the screen, this TV camera in slow motion after the race was positioned at the end of his lane.

So you watched him run directly towards the camera for the 9.9 seconds or whatever it took to win the race. And in slow motion, it was a marvellous thing to watch in particular.

For throughout that race, his eyes were focused directly ahead, without diverting left or right. And every muscle and sinew in his body seemed to be straining and working towards arriving first at the finishing line.

It was a model of determination and focus, a model of commitment, a model of being single-minded towards the goal that awaited him at the end of the straight.

His eyes were wide open, and it was only after crossing the finishing line that he looked left and right, saw where the competitors were, acknowledged the crowd, lifted his arms and enjoyed the applause of the crowd.

[2 : 27] Sport offers us wonderful illustrations for the great character of commitment and determination. And when you have TV close-ups and TV angles that are different from what you usually watch, it sharpens that image of commitment and determination.

Whether it's Linford Christie running down the straight, or whether it's, I was going to say Ricky Ponting, but he didn't do too well yesterday, but the camera I remember seeing a few test matches ago was focusing on his face, and his eyes were just staring, watching the bowler coming in and the ball being released from the bowler.

Whether it's Andre Agassi's concentration when he's playing tennis, or a weightlifter's focus as he's ready to grip these great big weights and hoist them over his head and so on.

The Apostle Paul uses the athletic or sport analogy in this chapter 3 of Philippians to draw the lesson of commitment for us as Christians in our Christian life.

He says, It is not that I've already obtained this or have already reached the goal, that is, arriving in heaven, risen from the dead like Jesus already has, as he described in the previous verses we saw last week.

[3 : 39] But I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I've made it my own, but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Twice in those three verses he says, I press on, just like the children's song that we sang earlier in the service. Press on. The idea of pressing on is full of energy and urgency and determination.

It's a word that conjures up the ideas of focus, of energy, of effort, supreme human effort, a relentless perseverance towards the goal that lies ahead.

That's behind the word that's used. It's a present tense. So it's not just something the Apostle Paul or a Christian should do once, but it's to be a constant effort, a constant determination, pressing on for the goal that lies before the Christian.

And that goal or the finishing tape he describes in verse 14, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

[5 : 05] The heavenly call, in a sense, was the original call to be a member of God's family, to be a Christian saved through Jesus' death. But it's a call to heaven.

That's our eternal destiny. It's where we'll finally end up as Christians. And it's a prize, in a sense. Not a prize in the sense of us competing against each other to get their first or get their best, but it's a prize for each and every person who's a Christian, a member of God's family saved through Jesus.

And Paul is pressing on for that heavenly prize of the call to heaven, in effect, by God in Christ. Now, though this language is full of human effort, and though it's right to apply that to our Christian lives, that we should be expending every effort, all our determination, and our focus to arrive at that heavenly destination in Christ, it's not simply that arriving in heaven is the reward for our effort.

It's not that our salvation, our heavenly destiny, is God's gift to us because we've worked hard. It's actually a balance that's going on here. Looking back to verse 12, for example, I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own.

That is, our expenditure of energy and effort, full though that should be, is based on and in response to Christ Jesus having made us His own.

[6 : 47] Someone says, because Christ has seized me, I seize the goal that lies ahead of me. Because Christ has made me His own, I want to make that goal my own.

That is, our effort, our energy, is to be full as it possibly can be, but reliant on what God has done for us. If you remember back two weeks when we looked at some of the opening verses of this letter, Paul says, because the work that God has begun in you, He will bring it to completion on the day of Christ.

So there's a sense in which it is God's work in us, we're to expend all our effort under God, but it is God's work that will be brought to completion on the day of Christ, the crossing of the finishing line, so to speak.

So there is a real balance here. Because God has actually begun the work and will bring it to completion gives us no excuse for sitting back, for lazing back, and just sort of resting in what God has done.

Rather, the activity of God in us and for us is to be an increased motivation for our own commitment, focus, determination, energy, and urgency in crossing the finishing line at the end of our lives in faith.

[8 : 06] What God has done for us is grace and mercy undeserved by us, but grace does not lead to complacency in the Christian life.

God's grace for us actually commands our thoroughgoing commitment, our relentless pursuit of heaven, our pressing on with every sinew and muscle working and straining for that goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Today, as I said at the beginning of the service, is what we call Commitment Sunday. Our primary commitment as Christians is to finish the Christian race full of faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

That is, throughout our life, day by day, every day, to keep our focus on the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. With athletic determination, with an undistracted focus, fixing our eyes on that heavenly call that awaits us at the end of our life through faith.

That will mean that just as an athlete trains and has a decent diet and so on to get to that finishing goal, so ought we take seriously, if we're committed to that goal, our daily spiritual sustenance to ensure that we get there.

[9 : 31] Three basic things comprise that the scriptures teach us. our regular daily diet of Bible reading, a regular daily diet of prayer, a regular daily diet of Christian fellowship.

That is, if we are committed to that heavenly goal at the end of our life, then we will be committed to reading the Bible regularly ourselves with other Christians through sermons, Bible study groups, and so on.

not just taking that as a sort of added extra when we've got the energy or the time, but expending commitment to make sure that we've got the time, to make sure that we've got the energy, and to do that in the best way we can, individually and together as Christians.

The same for our prayers each day, making sure that we're committed to them as an act of faith and trust in God that will keep seeing our faith being sustained day by day towards the finishing line of the heavenly call, the prize of the heavenly call.

And the same for our Christian fellowship. For we're not in this race in competition with each other. It's not me against you or you against somebody else. We're here together to cross the finishing line in the end together.

[10 : 48] And so there is mutual encouragement that is an essential ingredient of a healthy Christian life. So there will be a keen commitment not only to church attendance on a Sunday but to real Christian fellowship on Sundays as in during the week through our small groups, through our prayers, through our conversations with people that we're encouraging and edifying and building each other up so that we all finish the Christian race full of faith in Christ.

Commitment is becoming a sort of bit of a lost virtue in our post-modern times it seems. They say and slightly jokingly I guess that the reason why many young people don't tie up their shoelaces this day is that that would express too much commitment to that pair of shoes for too long during the day.

Now that may be slightly flippant but there is a sense in which more and more of us lack commitment to some things. We sort of drift along in the crowd not wanting to tie ourselves down just in case something better might come up.

So we try and keep our diaries free or we don't necessarily want to commit to this that or the other because who knows what tomorrow might bring that might actually attract us more.

And sadly this perhaps growing lack of commitment in our society is infiltrating Christian life too. Too often we're absorbed by daily living by the attractions and allures of our world by its temptations or by its burdens tempted by all sorts of Turkish delights each day or we're burdened by our world's concern we're burdened by regrets we're looking back all the time to what could have been or is no longer.

[12 : 45] We ought to keep looking ahead. Paul says not looking back but looking forward pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

It's the finishing line that matters. So we're to shun the distractions and temptations of our world we're not to look back to the burdens of the past the regrets of the past or even the glory days of the past but rather looking forward pressing on with focus and determination eyes straight ahead for the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now the reason why Paul is so strong in his language and illustration here is because we need to hear this. That is our default position as Christians like the Philippians 2000 years ago.

Our default position is to sort of drift and be distracted. Our default position is to go after what the world offers. even though it offers more than it ever delivers. See we live in a world that's fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Overtly or perhaps even unconsciously. We live in a world that actually seeks to lead us astray, away from God, to live for today.

[14 : 10] We live in a world that actually wants to tempt us, to deceive us, to divert us. And it was no different in Philippi 2000 years ago. Even though people call these the post-modern times and therefore we're all very different, we're actually all very the same as century by century goes on.

It's remarkable to me how relevant the scriptures are from 2000 years ago to the society in which we live today. And so the warnings of then apply equally to today.

That's why Paul says in verse 18, for many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. I've often told you of them and now I tell you even with tears. That is the context in which we live like the Philippians 2000 years ago.

The context is a world which is opposed to Christ basically. And that opposition to Christ will come in its ideologies and philosophies, its offerings, its temptations, its burdens and concerns.

And all of that will provide plenty of opportunity for us to go off the path, to be distracted and diverted from finishing in faith, crossing that finishing line.

[15 : 21] In verse 19, Paul describes this opposition in three ways. He says at the beginning that their end is destruction and then the description of them, firstly, their God is the belly.

Well, that could have been written today of our world. For our world is consumed by indulgence. Not necessarily the stuffing full of food, literally the belly, but people's appetite for whether it's food or wealth or prestige or sex or power is often insatiable.

See, our world is full of gluttons and gourmets and pleasure seekers and indulgence, even greed, pandering to self, living for oneself and living for today.

That is, the focus becomes so absorbed in the here and now that the finishing tape is long forgotten. Today is all that matters. Carpe diem sees the day.

Such people, Paul says, are enemies of the cross. It's a description of our world as much as Paul's world 2,000 years ago in Philippi. Now, if indulgence is the first step, the second step is to justify that indulgence.

[16 : 39] Paul describes that in verse 19 as their glory is in their shame. That is, if you like, even a reversal of moral standards. Firstly, there is the indulgence, the filling of the belly as he describes it.

Their God is their belly. But then, perhaps even worse, comes the justification for it. That it is right or good. And that's our world, isn't it?

We are bombarded with supermarket shelves, with TV advertising, with glossy magazines inside newspapers and so on, that tell us, indulge yourself, pamper yourself, fill yourself, have this new taste sensation, this new delight, whatever it is.

It's okay, you've earned it. It's justifying indulgence. It's glorying in shame. It's a reversal of moral standards of what God requires.

And that's his description in the middle of verse 19. Paul elsewhere calls it even more sharply, those who call good evil.

[17 : 45] And they call what is evil, good. To perversion of moral standards. And that's our world as much as the Philippian world.

Such people, Paul says, are enemies of the cross of Christ. Christ. And then his third description of them at the end of verse 19 is that their minds are set on earthly things.

There's no finishing tape in their minds. There's no heavenly goal in their minds. Their minds are locked into here and now.

Today. No further. Because tomorrow can't be guaranteed. Their minds are set on living for today and living for themselves.

And such people, he says, are enemies of the cross of Christ. Notice, you see, that in contrast, Christian commitment requires right thinking.

[18 : 43] Minds that are set are right. not on the here and now, not on earthly things, but minds that are set on heavenly things. That is, minds that are focused on the finishing tape.

Minds that are focused on our heavenly calling. Our ultimate destiny from God in Christ. And throughout this letter to the Philippians, the importance of our mind is frequently mentioned.

Back in chapter two, when the example of Jesus filled with glory, but coming in humility on earth to die in obedience to God and then finally to be raised in glory under which every knee will bow.

Set, have the same mind among you, Paul says, at the beginning of that description. That is, think rightly. Later on in the next chapter, chapter four, he'll say whatever is noble, whatever is true and honorable, think on these things.

That is, getting our minds right is the first step towards right and proper Christian commitment. Instead of being shaped by our world and distracted by it, we are to follow Paul's example.

[19 : 48] He says in verse 17, brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. See, Christian commitment benefits from good Christian role models, from mature Christians.

So those who are younger in the Christian faith benefit from those who are older, mature, more godly in the Christian faith. It may be that if you're a young Christian, it would be good to have a role model, a Christian mentor, someone who you can pray with, read the Bible with.

Maybe it's someone in a Bible study group. But it may well be a thing to find, a person to find, to help you finish the race as you see someone who's run so much of the race in faith already.

Instead of being earthly minded, like those who are enemies of the cross, we are to be heavenly minded. Paul says in verse 20, our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we're expecting a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He'll transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

[21 : 04] You see, our world thinks that indulging the body gives full expression to the body. But no, Paul says, with a heavenly minded focus on Jesus who is coming again, we realize that our body then will be conformed to his glory, far more glorious than the beautiful physical bodies that our world tries to parade before us.

A body that's conformed to the glory of Jesus. Jesus. So Jesus is to be our focus. He's the finishing tape.

He's the goal. He's the prize. Being found righteous in him on the final day. And just like for our World Cup soccer players, the glory of playing in Germany in June or July next year has motivated them to train and train hard and work together as a team and for some of them not to go into retirement.

The return of Jesus for us is to be a significant motivating factor for our Christian commitment. Knowing that he's coming again and we'll confront him on his return is to motivate us to be thoroughly, totally dedicated, committed, focused and fixed on his return day by day in our Christian life.

All of this begs the question then, how in practice are we committed to that finishing tape? Firstly, is our use of our time submitted to that goal?

[22 : 44] That is, have we harnessed our time so that we are focused on finishing in faith? Like the athlete who trains for the prize, who's disciplined in their use of time?

Getting up every morning before it's like to train and swim laps or run laps or whatever it is. Ian Thought's just come out of a year off and says I enjoyed sleeping in but now it's the early mornings all over again.

Well how disciplined are we in our use of time if we are to express commitment to press on to the finishing tape? That is, are we committed to making time for Bible reading each day, for daily prayers, for being in church each week, for having Christian fellowship outside a Sunday church service so that we're encouraging other Christians and being encouraged by them?

Are we committed to that or is it just when we've got the energy and didn't have a late night on a Saturday night? Do we discipline our Saturday night so that we've got energy on Sunday to serve God and so on?

Are we committed to making time for good strong Christian relationships through a Bible study group, through our hospitality and so on? Because we want to encourage other Christians to finish well and we want to be encouraged by them also.

[24 : 08] Are we committed to making time for others who are not Christians for the sake of the gospel so that we make time to develop relationships with non-Christian people so that they will see our example and come to faith in Jesus Christ?

Are we committed to making time to serve God's people using our gifts, our talents and our abilities? So are we committed if we're musically gifted to help out in music in church or provide hospitality or drive people to church or serve on a morning tea roster or arrange flowers or read the Bible or mow the lawns or teach a children's group, a Sunday school, a youth group or something?

Or are we too precious of our time rather than generous and committed in serving God and serving his people? We handed out a blue form a couple of weeks ago.

If you didn't get one, as I said, there are plenty of spares on top of the pigeonholes by the exit door. We encourage you to pray and think seriously about your commitment of time in serving God and his people here in your local church in ways that are appropriate for you and for your abilities and gifts.

Well, if our time is to be committed to God, so ought our money be. How committed are you in your use of your money with the goal or the prize of the goal of the heavenly call in mind?

[25 : 40] See, our world is wanting us to spend money all the time on things that are really temporary, fleeting, insignificant. Are you committed to budgeting your money for Christian ministry and mission?

Or is what you give a bit of leftover when there is any? Are you committed to giving regularly for Christian ministry and mission?

Or is it just on the weeks you decide to come to church? Is your commitment expressed by using giving envelopes or direct debit giving so that you're regular and systematic, you've thought about and prayed about and have budgeted for what you give?

Or not? Are you committed to giving generously for the sake of the poor, for the sake of those who are not Christians, for the sake of missions, either the ones we support here at Holy Trinity with part of our own budget going to support missions in other places or through your own association with mission organisations?

Or not? A white slip was handed out a couple of weeks ago. Again, plenty of spares above the pigeonholes if you didn't get one. It may well be helpful to fill that in and sign it as your pledge to God of your commitment of Christian giving here at Holy Trinity.

[27 : 06] And as we said at the annual meeting and when those slips are handed out, it helps us in budgeting, but it may also just as much help you in filling in that slip and indicating your pledge of giving, your commitment to giving.

Is your commitment to giving increasing year by year? So that if you give 6% of your income this year, next year you're going to aim to give 7%.

Is your commitment to restrain your expenditure so that you can give more for others, more for the gospel, more for the glory of God and so on? Well, there's some of the questions we must take seriously if we're expressing real commitment to God.

It's an uncomfortable subject and one that I often receive complaints about, to be honest, but one that we need to address because it seems to me that our hip pocket is the last part of us to be converted and the first part of us, to lead us astray.

And to be honest, I see Christians failing and failing to continue in faith because of the allure in the end of wealth expressed in a variety of ways.

[28 : 17] But you see people who want to put all their wealth into buying a bigger, better house, but their Christian commitment wanes as their focus is on that wealth. Or it's in a job that takes them away from church, away from their family, etc.

Busier, longer hours because they get paid more and their Christian commitment wanes. Or whatever the other circumstance is. It's probably the devil's most successful strategy to lead people to fail, to cross the finishing line in faith.

In saying all of this, I don't want to imply, for it's not true, that our total Christian commitment must be absorbed in this church. But our primary focus ought to be the church which we belong to in supporting its ministry, its mission, its activities and so on.

Not necessarily our total commitment, far from it, but certainly our major one as Christians. Last week we may remember the quote Rod gave in the sermon from the great hymn, my richest gain I count but loss.

And I fear that for many of us on the day of Christ, one of the things we'll be most ashamed about will be our stinginess in the use of our money and perhaps our time in the service and ministry of God's gospel.

[29 : 38] Today I finish with a quote from a different hymn. May I run the race before me, strong and brave to face the foe, looking only unto Jesus as I onward go.

May that be our prayer today in our commitment to God. At the end of the service in our final hymn, our offerings will be received and in that you can place those blue and white commitment forms at the end of the service and they'll be appropriately and confidentially dealt with as well.

But if you've forgotten to bring them or have not thought or prayed about it yet, then let me urge you to do that and when you're ready to return those in any collection, ideally in the next couple of weeks.

Let's pray. Lord our God, we thank you that by your grace and mercy you have made us your own in Christ and we thank you for the prize of the heavenly call.

Lord God, stir us up to be thoroughly committed to that eternal heavenly prize. Energize us to press on day by day, expressing our commitment in our use of time and money, in our prayer and Bible reading and in our Christian fellowship.

[31 : 14] That we with all your people here may arrive on that final day full of faith to receive that heavenly prize in Christ.

Amen.