

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:7-14 (Philippians #10)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 11-21-10

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Come with me, if you will, please, to Philippians Chapter 3, where our target for today is Verses 7 through 14, which is an interesting passage, in the sense that it is Paul's personal testimony—but there isn't anything here about being on the road to Damascus and the blinding light and hearing the voice and all of that; instead, he frames it in terms of universal theological truth *based* on his own conversion, and something that is possible for *all of us* to relate to.

It was the final three verses that we read last week which I said concludes that passage, which also introduces the passage for us today. Follow me, if you will, at Philippians Chapter 3, starting at Verse 4. He says: "although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more." Now, that is a strong statement! He is saying that, "By the standards in which I grew up, I was the superstar, spiritually." He continues: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

Now, what he is saying is that in the highly legalistic world of the Pharisees in which Paul was born and bred in the first century (Lk. 18:9; Rom. 9:31-32a; 10:2-3), he achieved—he excelled "beyond" anyone else (Gal. 1:14).

Now, "circumcised the eighth day"—he did not have a lot to do with that; but through the obedience of his parents, he received "the sign of the covenant" of God (Gen. 17:11-12). His pedigree was impeccable. And unlike the "Judaizers" who prided themselves in forcing circumcision on Gentile converts (Acts 15:1, 6; Gal. 6:12-13), Paul could claim obedience to the "real thing."

"Of the nation of Israel" describes his noble birth. There was no mixed stock in *his background*! He was a direct descendant of Abraham and Jacob. He was one of the "chosen people" (Deut. 7:6), and *proud of it!*

He even specifies: "of the tribe of Benjamin." There is plenty of speculation over why Paul includes that reference. I think the best conclusion seems to be that he is simply reinforcing his *legitimate* pedigree as a *genuine* Israelite of proper breeding, and *he* even knew which tribe he had descended from (cf. Rom. 11:1).

Those were his inheritance. Then he moves on to the things that he *did* through his own efforts at righteousness: He says he was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews," meaning: "I was the top of the pile!" He was universally regarded as the leader, the *model* of what a religious superstar should be.

"As to the Law, a Pharisee." You know, there is so much about the Pharisees because they opposed Jesus so much, but do you realize: There were only something like about 600 card-carrying Pharisees in the first century? It was a *very* elite group, and Paul prided himself for having made the choice to be a member of the *most* rigorous, *most* scrupulous, *most* demanding of all the groups among the Jews (Acts 26:5). That is like saying: "As to working out, *I* was a triathlete!" He was the *top* of the heap!

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:7-14 (Philippians #10)

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---

And surely, he had come to know what *Jesus* had to say about the Pharisees. Do you realize what he is saying? "I was a Pharisee *of the Pharisees!*" He is painting the picture of how far he had come when he came to Christ. In Matthew 23, Verse 2, and then Verses 5 through 7, Jesus says these words: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses"—that's a way of saying: "They claim *for themselves* to be the spokesmen for God"—"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments." Those are the decorations and the clothing that they wore to set themselves off, to show off to people and say, "See how holy I am! You can tell by the way I dress." He continued: "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men."

How impressed is *Jesus* with stuff like that? Go on in Matthew Chapter 23 to Verse 33—"You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" Or, Verse 13—"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

What He is saying is: "The teachings of the Pharisees" did not bring anybody closer to God, they *kept them away* (Matt. 16:12). It built walls! Man doing religion is a *disaster* (e.g., Deut. 12:8; Prov. 30:12; Is. 65:5; Jer. 2:22; Lk. 11:39; 16:15), and the Pharisees did it better than anybody else ever did the disaster!

So, Jesus says subtly in Verse 15—if you didn't get it in Verse 13—"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" And Verse 23—"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Verse 25—"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Verse 27—"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" Are you starting to catch on to Jesus' attitude about the religion of the Pharisees?

All that was true. And Paul said: "I was a Pharisee *of the Pharisees!*" That was his perspective *prior* to his salvation; he had been proud of that. He is talking about all that he did *in the flesh*. He says: "If anybody could have confidence in *fleshly religion*, I far more!"

And by the time he wrote Philippians, he understands: That was *worse* than a waste of time. What a difference between man doing religion, and what God wants.

How far did Paul take it? He says: "As to zeal," I was "a persecutor of the church." In his zeal for the Law, as it was twisted and misrepresented by the scribes and Pharisees, Paul *actually thought* he was doing God a favor by threatening Christians, persecuting them—even to the point of murder (cf. Jn. 16:2).

He says: "As to the righteousness which is in the Law"—here is an amazing statement—"found blameless." Now, that *does not mean* that Paul was "blameless before God" (Deut. 18:13; cf. Ps. 143:2b; Ecc. 7:20; Matt. 5:48; Rom. 3:10). What he means is: By the system of *self-righteousness* which he and his companions held to (Lk. 18:9), *he* was at the top of the heap. Nobody did it better than he had done it.

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
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---

That takes us through Verse 6 in Philippians Chapter 3. Between Verse 6 and Verse 7, if you wanted to do a bit of collateral reading, go over to Acts Chapter 9, and read the first nine verses—when he was on the road to Damascus, and God intervened in his life, and the risen Christ appeared to him, and he was converted.

But now he is going to give his testimony of that conversion from *self*-righteousness to *true* righteousness, from religion in the flesh to the righteousness which only God can give (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21-22; 4:3-5, 13; 9:31-32a; Heb. 11:7).

We are going to go from Verse 7 through Verse 14 under these headings:

You Must Lose (vss. 7-8)

You Must Gain (vss. 8-11)

You Must Pursue (vss. 12-14)

Start out at Verse 7 through the beginning of Verse 8. Paul says: "But whatever things were gain to me..." And what is he referring to? See Verses 4, 5, and 6—all those things that he achieved in the flesh, in the name of Pharisaical religion. He said: All those "things" that "were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss..."

He had listed all of his advantages, *superior to anyone else* in his generation—his claim to position as an Israelite, noble birth, orthodox belief, scrupulous conduct, demonstrating *total* commitment—and *now* he understands: *None of those things* brought him one inch closer to God. All those things which were precious and important to Saul, the Pharisee, he now understands are *useless*—actually, *worse* than useless!

There is *nothing possible* on this Earth *worse* for human beings than *manmade religion*: people trying to get God to like them, trying to do good deeds to impress others. *Nothing is more poisonous to the soul!* You have to realize: That is *worthless!* They are *harmful*, they are *fleshly* efforts to gain acceptance with God which can never, ever do it (see Gal. 3:10, 21; Col. 2:20-23; cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Job 25:4; Jer. 17:9; Mic. 6:7; Rom. 5:6).

Circumcision is not a *bad* thing. Being born into a good family—*that* is not a bad thing. Being a leader, being recognized as a leader—that's a good thing. Being rigorous about your faith—that is commendable; *zeal* is a virtue (Titus 2:14). All of those things are of great value *when and if*—and *only* when and *only* if—they flow from a redeemed heart! (Rom. 8:8; Heb. 11:6a) Under *any other circumstances*, they are absolutely *odious to God!* If you think you can do anything to get God to accept you, you do not understand the message of God; you do not understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul says: "I have counted them as loss." It happened to him on the road to Damascus. It refers to a decision he made once for all: The *only way* you can be saved is the same way the Apostle Paul was saved—not that you have to be knocked off of a horse and see a blinding light, but you have to abandon hope in *everything you have*, and receive "the grace of God" (1 Cor. 15:10; cf. Rom. 3:20-24; Eph. 2:8-9).

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:7-14 (Philippians #10)

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---

Paul realized: God is *not* impressed with "the loftiness of men" (Is. 2:17). Everything he "thought" was a "gain" had to be reckoned for what it really was: a "loss." Everything you try to do to make God like you better only drives you further from Him, because that feeds your pride; and a proud person does not accept grace (Rom. 10:3-4).

Matthew Chapter 16, starting at Verse 24; again, the words of Jesus: "Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me"—He does not say, "Go to seminary"; He does not say, "Memorize all the rules and regulations of the Pharisees"; He says: "he must *deny himself*, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'" Now, *that* was vivid terminology, because the people to whom Jesus spoke lived under Roman oppression. *They had seen people* "take up" a "cross" and carry it, like He did when He went to die for our sins. And what that means is: A death sentence has been pronounced. Deny yourself—*die* to yourself (cf. Rom. 6:6; 8:13; Gal. 5:24). "Take up your cross"—and by the way, in Luke He adds the word "daily" (9:23). He continues: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world"—if everybody is *super-duper impressed* at your spirituality! That is what you get: Everybody is impressed...but not God. "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (vs. 26; cf. Pr. 11:4a; Mic. 6:7).

You may have been born into a Christian home. What a blessing! I'm jealous. I wasn't. That's good—but it won't save you. Your parents' coattails are *not long enough* to get you into Heaven! (see Prov. 9:12) You know the Bible—good, *great*; I am all for that. Keep going! Learn it better. But that is of *no value* unless you believe it (Heb. 4:2), unless you are "born again" (Jn. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). You might be *rigorously* nice—that is a great quality. I would prefer to hang around you, compared to some folks I know. But *that* won't take away your sins. You might be "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14)—that's wonderful. But unless you know Christ, you are still headed for an eternity of "torment" in what the Bible describes as "fire and brimstone" (Rev. 20:10; 21:8).

So, what do you need to lose in order to come to eternal life in Christ? Everything. That's all—just *everything*. The word "loss" in Verses 7 and 8 is a word that occurs in only one other place in the Bible: Acts Chapter 27, where it refers to Paul's shipwreck; and there, it was the "loss" of the ship that was necessary to gain the lives of all who were on board (vs. 22). It's kind of a parallel to what Paul says: "I counted them all as '*loss*.' I *walked away from it all*, that I might '*gain*' Christ."

So you must *lose* so that you must *gain*. Verse 8—"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things"—referring to everything he talked about: position, reputation, influence—"I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ."

Yeah, you must lose—lose your trust in everything else so that you must gain. What you must gain is Jesus Christ. There is *nothing* as important as "knowing" Him, nothing in the universe valuable enough to choose over "knowing" Christ! (see Prov. 2:5; 3:13-15; 9:10; Jer. 9:23-24; Jn. 17:3; 1 Jn. 5:20)

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
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---

He uses this expression "the surpassing value of knowing Christ." Many commentators think that Paul may have made up a word in order to make his point. The word would be something like the "superness" of knowing Christ, or the "all-surpassing greatness" of knowing Christ.

And when he says, "I have suffered the loss of all things," he is not *lamenting* what he missed from his former life, because he didn't miss it; he recognized that he was better off to let it all go (cf. Rom. 6:21). As the stars fade before the rising sun, *everything* fades in importance before "knowing" the Son of God.

And he says: "I count them but rubbish." Sometime, take a look at all the ways that English translations have translated that word "rubbish." It is a word that we dance around in translation, because it *can* mean "excrement." It can also mean the garbage thrown away to the dogs after a meal. Anyway, it is a very vivid thing. He says: "Every single thing that *my whole world* considered to be super-duper-spiritual, I had to realize is just 'rubbish'—it's to be *thrown away!*" It is *worse* than worthless, because it *distracts you* from the real thing (Lk. 16:15).

What you must "gain" is Jesus Christ. So read the whole section in the context, starting at Verse 8—"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him"—now, here it comes—"not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law"—that's what the Pharisees *knocked themselves out* to do: "establish their own righteousness" (Rom. 10:3)—"but that [righteousness] which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

What did he come to know *in place of* everything he left behind? Christ—"that I may *gain Christ* and may be *found in Him*" with a "righteousness" that is "from God" through "faith" (cf. Rom. 3:22; 4:3-5, 11).

There is quite a description here of the "righteousness" that is through "faith" and "comes from God" (see Is. 61:10):

First of all: It is *Christ's* righteousness (see 2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Is. 45:24a; Jer. 33:16; Rom. 1:17; 3:22; 5:19; 1 Cor. 1:30). It is the right thing to do to come to Christ for salvation, because that transaction is for the "glory" of God (2 Cor. 1:20; 4:4, 6, 15; Eph. 1:14; Phil. 1:11; 2:11; Rev. 4:11; 5:12).

Paul is not talking about sacrificing "all" these "things" like a fisherman giving up the bait in order to catch the fish he wants. He realizes that he jettisons *the whole cargo* of self-righteousness in order to gain the right thing. Salvation brings a righteousness which belongs "*only*" to Jesus Christ (Is. 45:24; Mk. 10:18b; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22), and it can be had *only* by being *in Him* through faith (see Rom. 1:16-17; 9:30; 1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 11:7).

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
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---

When you come to Jesus Christ—when you admit, "I am a sinner," and you ask God to forgive your sins (Lk. 18:13), it is as if all of your *unrighteousness* and all of your pride—and even all the *very best* things you have ever done, which fall woefully short of perfection (Is. 64:6)—*all* of that is put on Christ as He died on the Cross (Is. 53:5-12). And in exchange, His *perfect* "righteousness" is "credited" to you (Rom. 4:5; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21). I have been offered a few sweet deals in my life; there is *nothing* better than that! *My* unrighteousness for *His* righteousness!

This "righteousness" through "faith" which "comes from God" is *not* merited by works that you can do. This righteousness which *counts* before God *does not* depend on you conforming yourself to Old Testament law (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:10), or any other system of law (Gal. 2:21; 3:21), or anything the Pharisees have ever come up with (Matt. 5:20). God's righteousness is given to the *undeserving*! It *cannot be earned*, because *no one* can be good enough (Ecc. 7:20). God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5). "Christ died" for our sins "while we were [His] enemies" (Rom. 5:8, 10).

Now, how do you get it? It is appropriated by "faith" (Heb. 11:1). "Faith" is what you exercise in order to receive "the free gift of God." You *cannot earn* a "free gift"! If you do, it is no longer a gift (Rom. 4:4). Romans 6:23—"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So, this "righteousness" which comes "through faith" from "God" (Rom. 3:22)—well, it *comes from God*! It is provided by God. It brings you to God. It comes to you by faith which you exercise, and God gives you the whole thing as a "gift" (Rom. 3:24; 5:17). Ephesians 2:8-9—"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

God calls you to "believe" (Jn. 1:12; 3:15-16; 5:24; 6:40; 8:24; Acts 10:43; 13:39; Rom. 10:9; Gal. 2:16; Heb. 11:6). Jesus says: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and *I will give you rest*" (Matt. 11:28; cf. Is. 55:1; Rev. 21:6; 22:17). It is a gift.

And when you have this "righteousness" which is "through faith" which is given from "God," it results, *then*, in you striving after spiritual perfection (see Ezek. 36:27; Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:14; 1 Jn. 5:3). When you are forgiven and redeemed, it provokes thanksgiving; it produces loyalty and service to the One who forgives, to the One who redeems (Ps. 50:15; 116:12). That is why Paul says the goal is to "know Him."

It is interesting: To come to Christ is to "come to know Him" (1 Jn. 2:4). But to *belong* to Christ is to want to "know" Him *better* (Ex. 33:13, 18; cf. Ps. 25:4; 27:11; Hos. 6:3). It is entering into a relationship that continues, and it grows (Jn. 14:21).

Every child of God has, *deep* within him or her, the desire to know God better, to understand the Son better and better every day, and that means being acquainted with things like Paul mentioned: "the power of His resurrection"—that refers to living by the power of the risen Christ (Rom. 6:4). Only in Him can you "reckon" yourself "dead to sin" and "alive" to righteousness (Rom. 6:11, NKJV)—like you have been raised from the dead, because in a sense, you have (Rom. 6:13; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5; Col. 3:3-5).

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
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---

That means being united with Him in "the fellowship of His sufferings"—sharing in the "suffering" that is aimed at "Christ" (2 Cor. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:13; cf. Col. 1:24; 2 Tim. 3:12), to suffer because the "world hates" Christ (Jn. 15:18, 24), and associates you with Him (vs. 19). Well, that is an *honor* (see 1 Pet. 4:14, 16; cf. Matt. 5:11-12; Lk. 6:22-23). And Paul knew whereof he spoke. Remember, he wrote from prison—where he was unjustly, because of his testimony for Christ (2 Tim. 2:9).

It means being "conformed to His death"—referring to understanding your death to sin. Romans 6 puts it this way, starting in Verse 4—"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death"—that's not referring to *water* baptism, but it is a metaphor for you being identified with, united with "His death" (vs. 2; cf. Gal. 2:20)—"so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died"—died with Christ—"is freed from sin" (vss. 4-8). And so, Verse 11—"Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

So Paul says, "I have gained, knowing Him"—"in order that I may attain to the resurrection of the dead," he says (vs. 11). He is not *wishing* for some kind of celestial award available only to a very few, but he is talking about *in this life* he wants to live a life that would *truly reflect* the life of the risen Christ (Gal. 2:20).

Now, friend, spiritual perfection *cannot* be fully attained in this life (see 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Ecc. 7:20; Is. 64:6; Matt. 26:41; Rom. 3:10; 7:14-24; Gal. 5:17; Jas. 3:2; 1 Jn. 1:8); it *will not* be attained until you get to be with Christ (Heb. 12:23), but the *goal* is always before us: to live so that He gets the "glory" from us *all the time* (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. 2 Cor. 5:9; Col. 3:17).

There is a *huge* difference between striving to be good enough for God to accept you—you won't get there! You will "fall short" (Rom. 3:23). You will realize someday that *that* is like "rubbish"! But on the other hand, you receive the gift of eternal life "by grace through faith," and *from that day on*, in full joy, you strive to be more and more like your Savior (Rom. 13:14; cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:21-22).

So, thirdly: You must "*pursue*" (Heb. 12:14). The Christian life is not *passive*, it is an *active* thing (e.g., Mk. 12:30; cf. Ps. 119:4; 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Cor. 7:1; Gal. 6:9; Phil. 2:12; 1 Thess. 1:3; Titus 3:8, 14; Heb. 6:11; 12:1; 2 Pet. 1:5, 10; 3:14, 18; 1 Jn. 5:3). In Verse 12, he says: "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." That is not doubletalk! "I am grasping what I have been grasped for the purpose of doing!" His frame of mind about his life in Christ is crystal-clear: He realizes that he *has not* achieved perfection, and he knows he *will not* receive it or achieve perfection until he is with the Lord (Heb. 12:23); but the fact that he could never be perfect never deterred him from wanting to be better and better! That is what you strive for as a Christian (Prov. 4:18; 2 Cor. 3:18).

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---

He says: "I press on" (vs. 14; cf. Hos. 6:3a). That is the desire of a Christian (Job 17:9; Ps. 84:7; Phil. 1:9; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:1, 10). Yesterday's victories are wonderful—but they don't do anything for you *today*. Prior growth is wonderful, but it doesn't excuse you from *today's* need to "grow" more (Ps. 92:12; Eph. 4:15; 2 Pet. 3:18; cf. Col. 1:10)—to "lay hold of that for which I was also laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

Why did God save you? I wouldn't have—because I know what you were like! (Eph. 2:3; Titus 3:3) But I understand that He died for people like *me*, and so I guess you can get in on this, too! He wants to show you off. God wants to make *you* "Exhibit A" for His grace, to show off to the whole world (e.g., Job 1:8; 2:3; 1 Tim. 1:16).

And by the way, if you read the Book of Ephesians, He also wants to show you off *to the angels of Heaven!* (3:10) You know, this whole idea of salvation does not exist among the angels. The ones that fell, *fell*—and they stay fallen, and they are never redeemed (Heb. 2:16a). In describing our salvation, Peter says these are "things into which angels long to look" (1 Pet. 1:12). It's like they are looking at us, and they are saying, "Wow! What a glorious God! Look what He did in redeeming those people!" (see Lk. 15:10).

Christian maturity is what God wants for you because He wants to show you off for His glory (cf. Prov. 27:11; Rev. 5:9, 12). Pursue it. "Not" that you have "already obtained it," not that you have "already become perfect," but that you are "pressing on."

Then, Verse 13—"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

"Forgetting what lies behind" is crucial to moving forward. Dwell on past mistakes, even past victories—that distracts you from what you have to do today: It's "reaching forward to what lies ahead." That is a thought that is foreign to a lot of Christians. A lot of people seem to be content to maintain the status quo (cf. Rom. 12:11; Heb. 5:11; 6:11-12). "Status quo" is Latin that means "the mess we are already in." *Press on!* Press on. By God's grace, you can let go of the past (see Prov. 19:20).

I once had a man in my office who was miserable. He actually came because his parents asked him to come. He was in his late '20s. He had been estranged from his family. He had been in the military; he had been in the Special Forces. And he was feeling miserable; he was feeling guilty.

And I was talking to him, and I didn't take very long to discern that he had not yet committed his life to Christ, and so I said, "Do you understand the Gospel?" And he said, "Yeah, I was raised in a Christian home." "Well, that wasn't really what I asked. Do you understand the Gospel?" And he said, "Well, yeah, I think I do. The way I take it is: God created everything, and it was perfect; and man fell, and he screwed up the whole thing, and the Earth is cursed; and Christ came, and He died for our sins, and He was resurrected, and we just need to receive Him by faith." "So, do you want to preach Sunday?"



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Date: 11-21-10

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I said, "Have you committed your life to Christ?" He said, "No." So I said, "Well, don't you want to? Are you *enjoying* being miserable?" And he said, "Well, you don't know what I've done." I said, "Well, you were in Special Forces, weren't you?" "Yeah." "You were in"—he happened to have been in a certain place. He said, "Yeah." I said, "I have a pretty good imagination. I think I know some of the things you are doing." He said, "Well, those things that I did—that's what keeps me from coming to Christ." I said, "Oh, my friend, you have it *backward*! That is not keeping you from coming to Christ! That *brought Christ to you*! You need to *let go* of those things, and see them as *driving you* to Christ!" And God *moved*! And in that minute, this—Paul says "Hebrew of Hebrews"—this man among men started crying, and he gave his life to Christ that day. I don't know where he is now, but I trust he has "pressed on."

Paul says: "reaching forward to what lies ahead." You see, *that* will help you *get over* the past, because God has His glory for you. "Eagerly straining forward" is what that means, that phrase "reaching forward to what lies ahead"—"eagerly straining" for something.

I remember reading Philippians shortly after I had come to know Christ, and I read this "reaching forward to what lies ahead," and I had a vivid picture come into my mind: It was at the end of the first race that I ever won in a track meet in high school. I know that is hard to believe, looking at me now, but it was a lot of years and a lot of pounds ago. Where I went to school, they had a deal where you could be classified by age, height, and weight—or, lack thereof. And both by ability and by age and by height, I did not make the Varsity team; so instead of the mile, we ran three-quarters of a mile.

There were only four guys in this race: two from my school, two from the other school. I was leading after two laps. You know, the gun goes off at the end of the lap before the last one—therefore [it is called] "the gun lap." The gun went off. This guy from the other school passed me like I was standing still! And right behind him goes the *other* guy from his school! And I thought, "Well, third—I'll score a point"—you know, five for first, three for second, one for third...pat on the back for finishing. That's how it was going to go for the four of us. Then, the guy from *my* school passed me, and I was embarrassed.

And I just said, "Okay, 'if I perish, I perish'." I hadn't even read "Esther" yet (4:16). I finally caught the guy from my school on the back stretch. I caught the first guy from the other school about the middle of the last turn, and I went past him. It must have looked kind of funny; he was about six foot two, and I went past him—Yabba-Dabba-Doo, came around the corner, my little legs going as fast as they could. And I got around there, and I was one lane out, of course, and the guy that was leading was in the inside lane. I never looked at him. It was one of the smartest things I ever did. For one thing: He was bigger than the other guy, he was black, he was intimidating; and I just looked at the tape that was stretched across there. "If I don't make it, I don't make it, but I am not leaving anything here." And I just gave *every single thing I had*. I leaned—[with a] lower center of gravity, I could lean a little bit farther—and I won the race, they said, by about six inches. Everything ached, everything was burning—and it felt *so good*! Now, I can achieve that same feeling with one flight of stairs! "Pressing on"—giving everything. Sometimes, you even beat "Amazon Man"!

Sermon Title: The Surpassing Value  
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:7-14 (Philippians #10)

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 11-21-10

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That was about a year before I came to know Christ. And then, I read "Philippians" after I came to know Christ, and I thought, "You know, that's a pretty good picture!"

A lot of Christians live as if, to be godly is to be cautious, avoiding risk is next to godliness—but that is not true at all! Wisdom, maturity *does not* come by avoiding risk; it means determining what is important, and doing all you can to make it as likely as possible that you accomplish what is really important: knowing God (Jn. 17:3), and spreading the Gospel (Matt. 28:18-19; Lk. 24:47).

You show me anyone who wants to win—I'll show you someone who is not complacent. You show me someone who wants to honor God, and I'll show you someone who is willing to put it out there—someone willing to spend all the energy and all the resources he has in order to reach the goal.

Hebrews 12:1-2 puts it this way: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us"—that's the testimony of all the people in Hebrews Chapter 11, who lived by faith in the Old Testament—"let us also lay aside every encumbrance"—take off your sweats—"and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us *run with endurance* the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Like looking at that tape at the finish line: "Fix your eyes on Christ." *That* is what I want to be like! Run *hard*! "Run with endurance." And by the way: Notice that the sentence does not end there. As He did what He did for you, He was "despising the shame" that was wrongly cast upon Him. He "endured the cross"—the death (see Eph. 5:2).

What is the goal, back in Philippians? It is "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"—to be more like Him, *greater* maturity, *greater* outreach, *more* evangelism, *more* good works, *deeper* knowledge of God, *more* sincere worship.

Whatever you think you're doing that will make God like you better—*forget it!* You *can't!* "While we were *yet sinners*, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). "While we were *enemies*... Christ died for us." Live in His "grace" (1 Pet. 5:12), *and then* "reach forward" to the "upward call." How are you doing that? Are you "reaching forward to what lies ahead"? How much *will* you put out there?

There was a story that was told in a lot of newscasts around the country, back in the 1990s. It illustrates the kind of conviction and courage that Paul had in mind when he spoke of "reaching forward toward the goal." A version of the story was recorded in a Christian book called "Standing Tall." It's the story of Orestes Lorenzo Perez. He loved his country, but he could not stand what was happening in his country—which happened to be Cuba. So, in March of 1991, Lorenzo got into his MiG 23 fighter jet, he took off, he flew it under U.S. radar and safely landed in Key West, Florida. Upon defecting, he figured that Castro would be embarrassed to have one of his top pilots defect, and he would not want any memory of it left around, and so he figured he would immediately release Lorenzo's wife and his young sons to join him. He was wrong.

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---

But Lorenzo wasn't through. For the next 21 months, Lorenzo worked every waking hour to get his family out. After months of frustration and bureaucracy, he decided on a plan that was absolutely crazy. He decided that his only chance was to fly back to Cuba and *get* his family—only this time, he had one less MiG. He *did* have a 31-year-old Cessna. On December 9th of 1992, at 5:05 PM, Lorenzo Perez took off from Florida for a little seaside village in Cuba. He had been able to smuggle a message to his wife to tell her of the plan. But his chances of getting through the net of radar and MiGs that surround Cuba were slim and none. If he was spotted, it would be over in an instant.

So he flew in, just as he had flown out—skimming scant inches above the waves. At 5:43 PM, his wife Victoria spotted the plane as he was attempting to land on a busy highway just two blocks from the beach. She grabbed her boys, and they started running. Lorenzo brought the little Cessna down on the highway, narrowly missing a boulder in the middle of the road. Then he pulled to a stop just ten yards short of a head-on collision with a wide-eyed truck driver. Lorenzo brought the little Cessna down on the highway, and he said the hardest part—and the part that still pains him—was when Victoria and the boys jumped in, and he did not have time to hug or kiss them. "Shut up and sit down," he yelled. "I have to fly the plane!" They hit American airspace 21 minutes later, and *then* the hugs and kisses started flowing.

The night before he took off, Lorenzo was praying in a small chapel. A woman came up and said, "Don't be afraid. Your trip will be a success." Lorenzo didn't know this woman, and immediately wondered how she could know of his plans for the next day. He should have read Hebrews 13:2, about "entertaining an angel" and not "knowing it." He took it that God was assuring him that he would not be flying alone.

That is what a very brave, highly-trained, totally-committed man—sold out for the love of his wife and his children—would do *on Earth*. What a story of motivation and conviction and courage and character!

Friends, we have something *even more* important! Are you half as willing to pursue "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"? How valuable, how precious would it be to rescue your family from the likes of Fidel Castro and his machinations? How much *better* to have "the surpassing value of knowing Christ." You will never be alone in your endeavor to pursue more and more accurate, more and more intimate, more and more thorough knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to serve Him (Matt. 28:20b; Jn. 14:18, 21).

Press on, my friends. *Press on* for "the surpassing value"!

And let's pray:

*Our Father, how we do thank You for the riches that are ours in Christ Jesus. Thank You for sending Him to die in our place while we were Your "enemies," while we were "yet sinners." And Father, as I pray week in and week out, I ask again today that You would please do whatever is necessary in each of our hearts to make us the more useful for Your name's sake. If anyone here this morning has not yet yielded to Jesus Christ, please make this the day. Please, draw that one to Yourself, to the point of confession of sin and*

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*yeildedness to Your Son. And Father, whatever in our lives might be holding us back from "pressing on" to "the surpassing value" of better "knowing" Your Son, Jesus Christ, remove it, I pray. Do whatever You need to do in our hearts, that we would be of maximum usefulness for Your glory. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*